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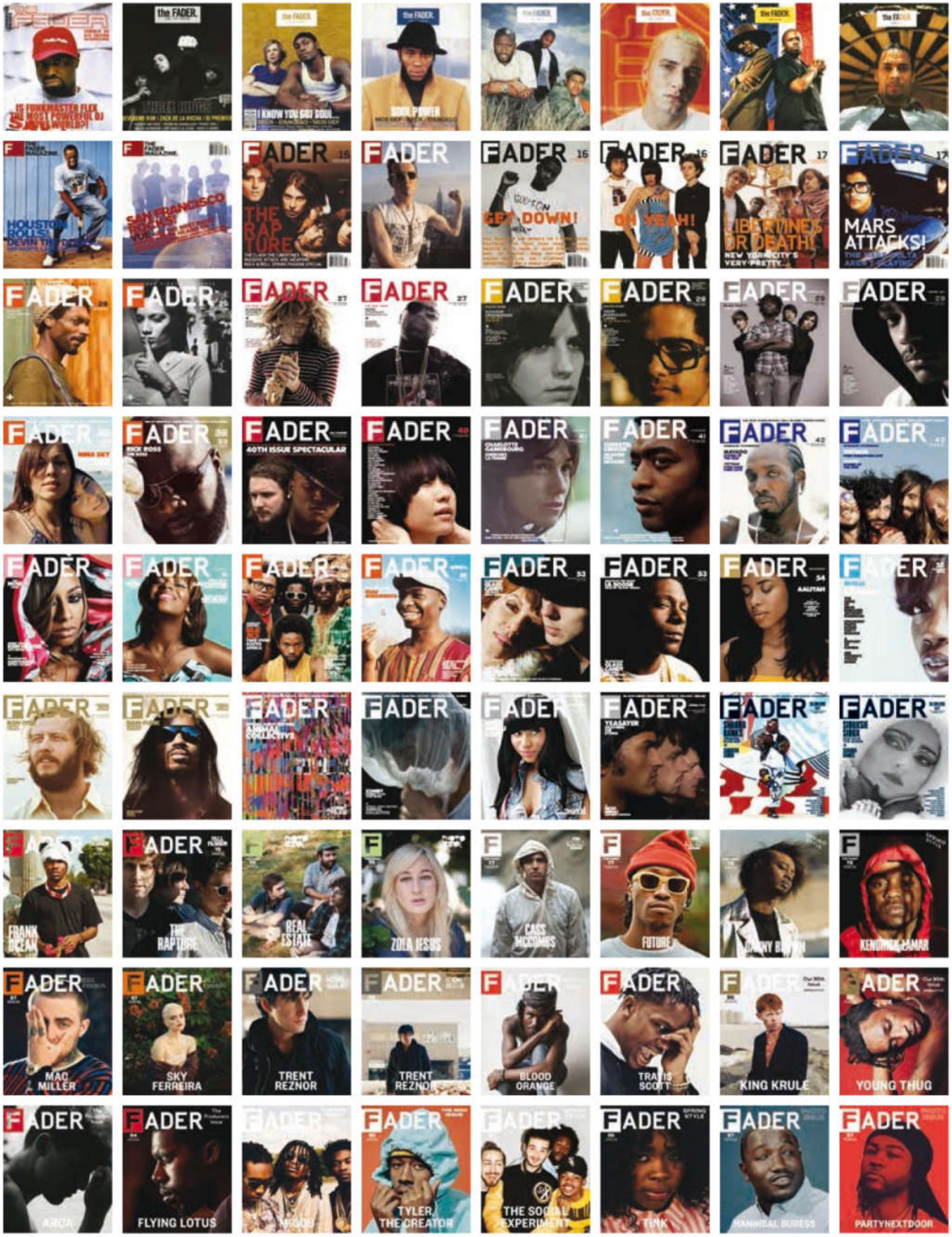
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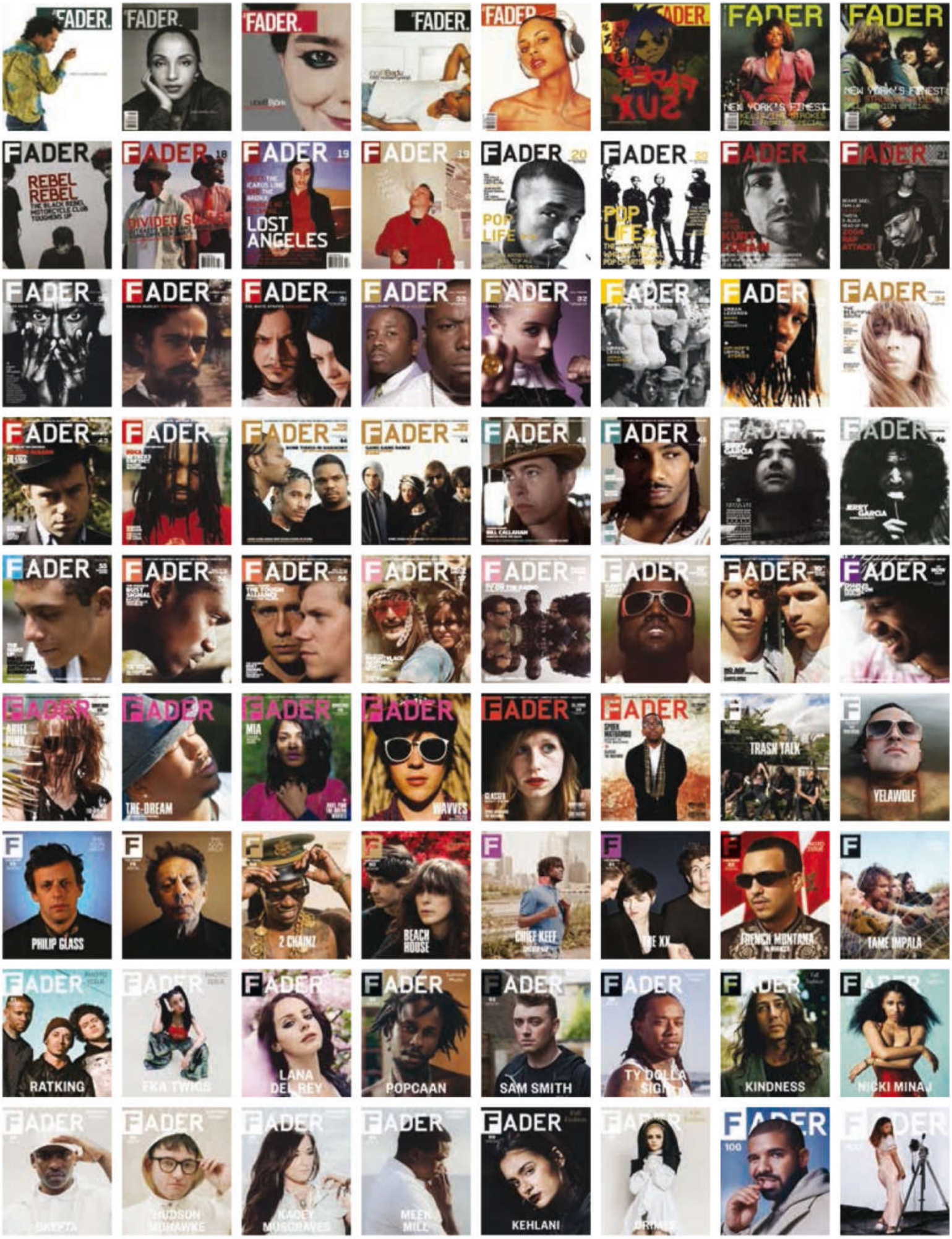
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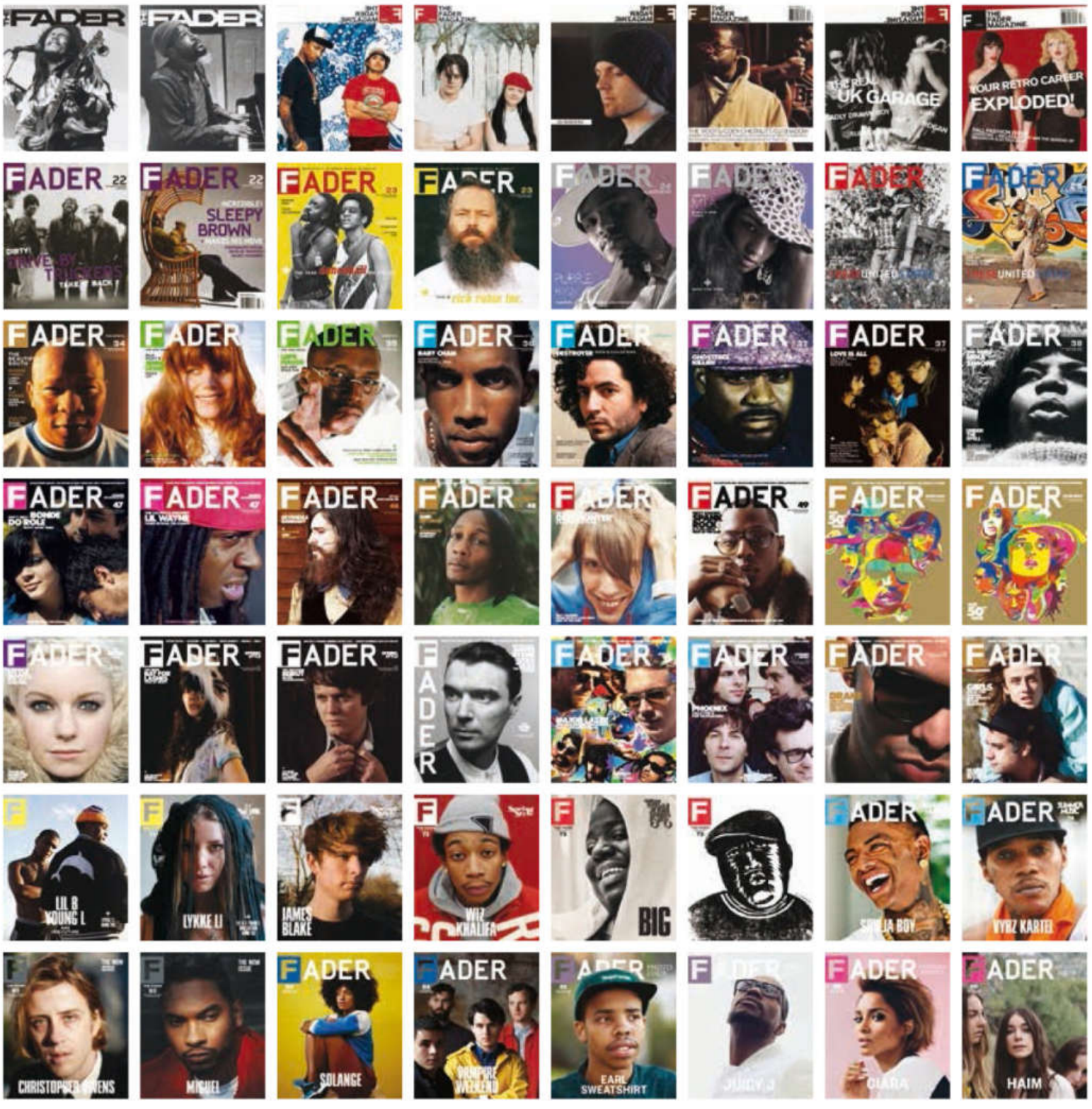



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MARS ATTACKS!
THE RAP TURE
40TH ISSUE SPECTACULAR
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THE RAPTURE
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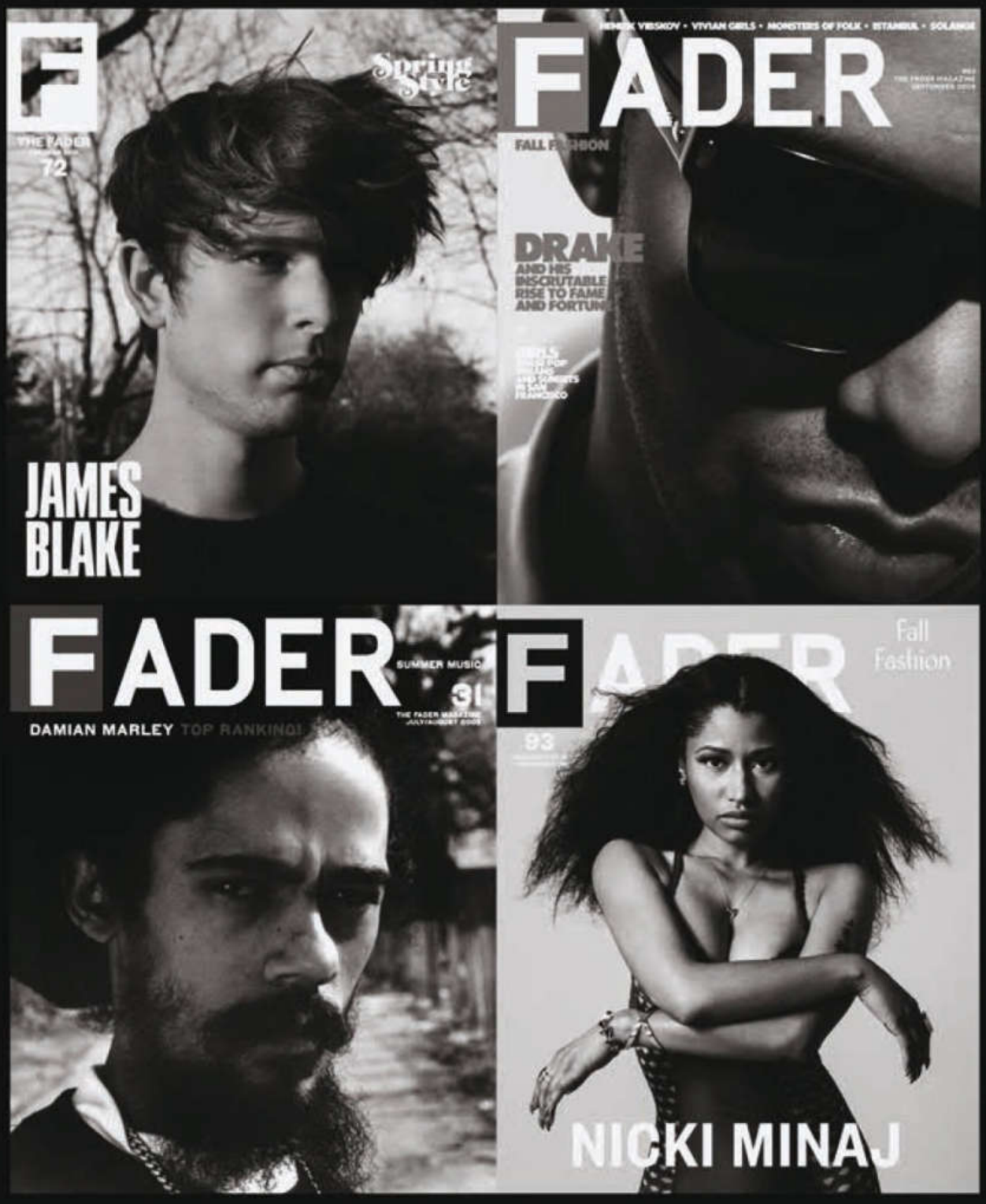


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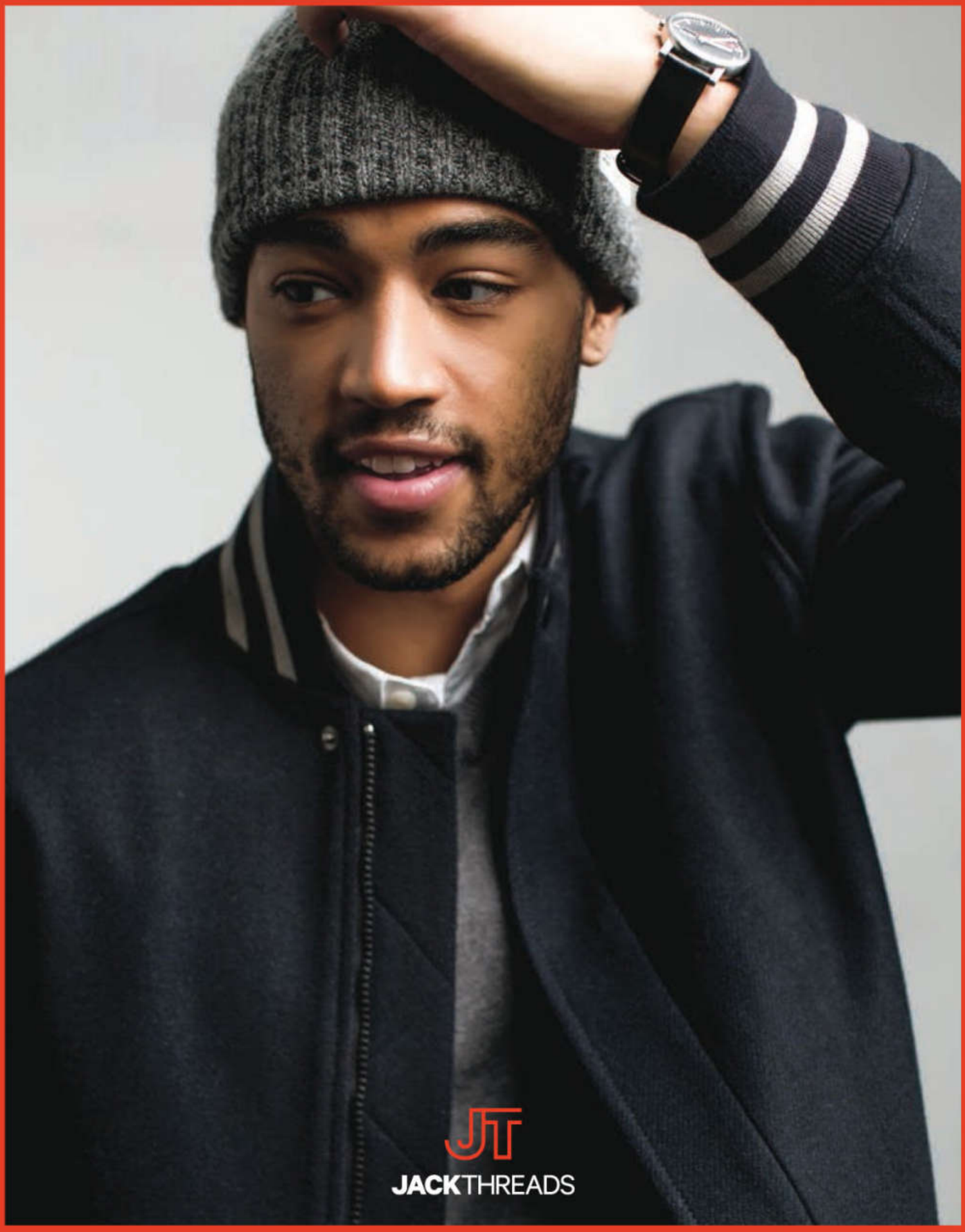
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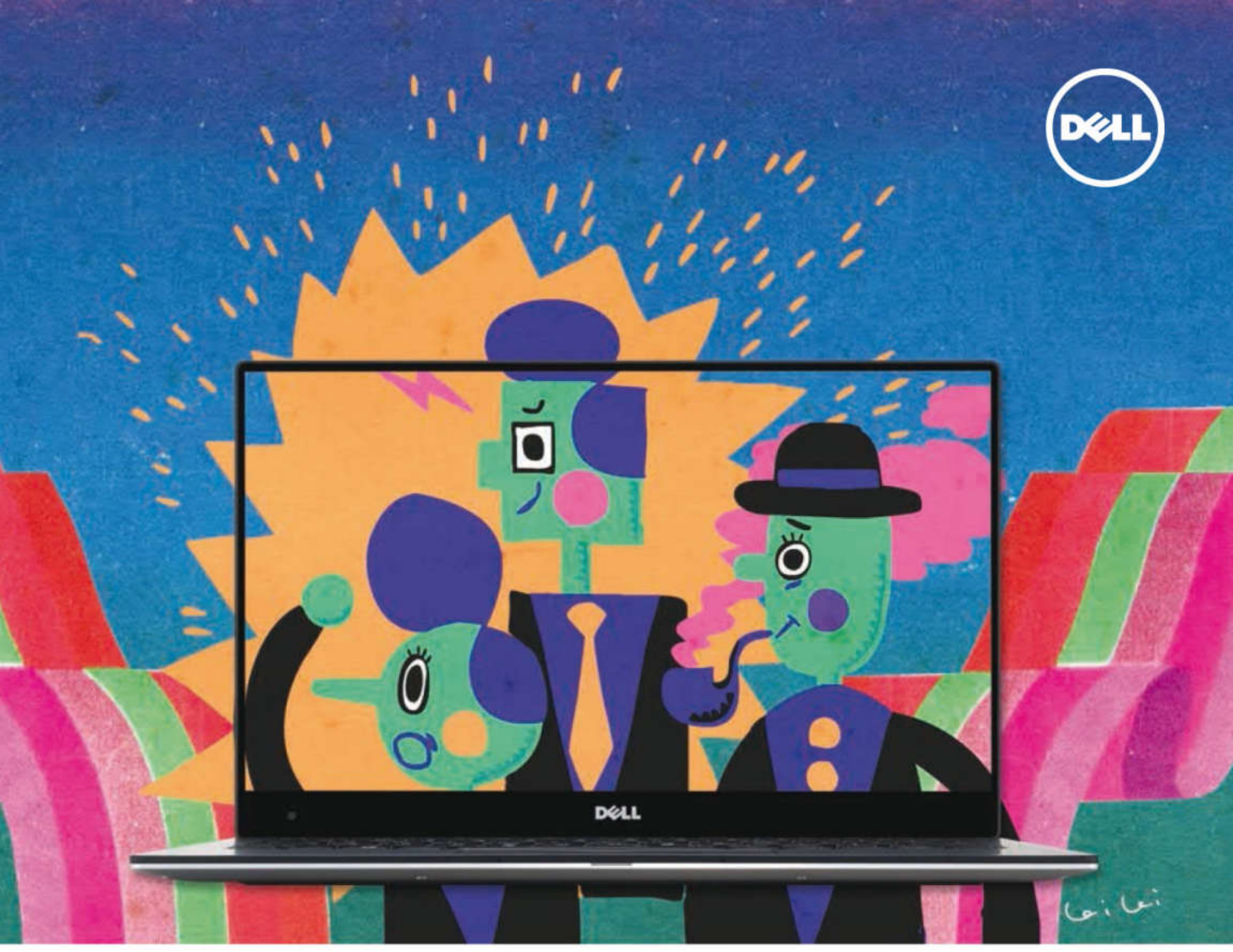

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Icona Pop
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"There's a reason that some studios survive for forty or fifty years and others are gone in five. There would be guys with great ears who would know how to tune the room and make it work." **Rick Rubin**

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"Even though we're not carrying on a dialogue, I hear you, you know? And when I make an album, all I want you to know is I hear you."
Drake

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TO THE NEXT HUNDRED...
ROB STONE & JON COHEN

Rob Stone: A fader allows a DJ to seamlessly mix together the sounds of one record with the sounds of another record. We created The FADER with that same purpose: to showcase the greatness in all genres of music, seamlessly moving between hip-hop and indie rock, dance and R&B, classical and country, while covering the culture that surrounds it all.

Without any publishing experience, we broke all the rules with our first issue. I remember photocopying cool ads from other magazines and using them in ours so it felt like we were a real publication. We did things unconventionally with the sole purpose of delivering the purest form of creativity and exposing artists that were taking chances and doing things differently.

We shot the cover for our second issue at Milk Studios in New York with an amazing young photographer, Jonathan Mannion. It's still one of my all-time favorites. We had Run from Run-DMC, Zack De La Rocha of Rage Against the Machine, and DJ Premier of Gangstarr. For an unknown magazine, we really felt like we'd made it when Mariah Carey, at her height, peeked in from next door to see what was going on. Afterwards, Rage Against the Machine and Gangstarr decided to go on tour together—that might've never happened if it wasn't for The FADER.

We've had an incredible run since then. We've been ahead of the curve with magical first covers for Pharrell Williams, Kanye West, M.I.A., The Strokes, The White Stripes, Drake, Nicki Minaj, Kendrick Lamar, Frank Ocean, Phoenix, Miguel, Rick Ross, and many more. Our award-winning icon issues have gone in depth about the lives of Jerry Garcia, Miles Davis, Nina Simone, The Notorious B.I.G., and so many other important musicians.

And we continue to dig deep and look far and wide to support true artistry, not only on our pages but on our stages at the legendary FADER FORT. There've been too many highlights to list them all, but I'll always remember Kanye West performing with the entire G.O.O.D. Music family, N.E.R.D and their mind-blowing crew of double-drummers, Matt and Kim being joined by Erykah Badu, Diddy doing his classic Bad Boy hits. And of course our annual celebration of Bun B's birthday.

As we celebrate our 100th issue, it's with tremendous gratitude to the many people who not only made The FADER happen but made The FADER exceptional. From past to current staff, managers, artists, journalists, photographers, DJs, our FARM team, friends, and the FADER family—we could not have done it without you.

Over the last six months, we've experienced the greatest growth in our history. We're truly becoming the leading voice in music and culture on a global scale. What I've realized most about The FADER is that music defines who we are. It brings out the best in us, comforts us, and accompanies us on our life's journey. Listening to a new amazing song is personal—it becomes critical to our lives. It gets in our DNA. We'll always shine the light on artists that we believe will make a difference. Now we want to bring that to every young person in the world.

Jon Cohen: As we approached our 100th issue, I've been asked, "What's the one thing you are most proud of with The FADER?" It's been an amazing 16 years, and so many moments come to mind. Some make me laugh, some make me cringe, but most make me realize that what we've built has exceeded my wildest dreams.

Even beyond all the artists whose first covers were for The FADER and whose first performances we have presented, I find myself going back to the initial conversations and various backstories that led to those big moments in the first place. Lee Harrison playing me the demos for this new act James Murphy had just started called LCD Soundsystem. Chris Atlas inviting Kanye West up to the office to meet everyone when he was just an emerging producer. Robert English coming up with the idea to have The FORT host a tribute to Lou Reed.

More than anything, I'm proud of the people who helped us build The FADER: our writers, editors, designers, photographers, sales and marketing teams, accounting, FARM team, and interns that have poured their passion, energy, and lives into making The FADER great.

Under the leadership of Lee Harrison, our first editorial team really set the tone for what we have built: hip-hop on the surface, punk rock at the core. Over the years, each edit team has carefully maintained that vision while adding their own layers and personality. From New York to London to Atlanta to L.A. and Brazil, we built a community that continues growing stronger than ever, 100 issues in, under the excellent guidance of Naomi Zeichner and Joseph Patel.

Along the way we were lucky to find Andy Cohn. Andy has been the magnet to bring so many worlds and facets of The FADER together. It's rare you find someone who can run the business side and also have the love and respect of every artist we cover. And last but not least, FADER would not be here if it were not for The Professor, Anthony Holland. For 16 years we have been throwing out ideas, and Anthony has always figured out how to make them happen, sometimes sleeping on the couch in the office for nights in a row to get it done.

It's been incredible from my perspective to watch the FADER family grow and come together. The camaraderie, creativity, and love for what we were doing has been the biggest part of our success.


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I CAME FROM THE GUTTER, I REALLY MADE IT. WHAT COULD GO WRONG?

I started reading The FADER online in college. I was into a lot of blogs but this one the heaviest. There's not a good reason why—I just felt that FADER, which had Bohagon MP3s and little Brooklyn jewelry designers and gossip about Ezra Koenig's blogspot, recognized me. I didn't have my own laptop, so I read FADER at a desktop computer in the library basement, by the anthropology stacks. I messaged Killer Mike on MySpace, downloaded hundreds of Lil Wayne songs, and went to see Diplo DJ. I saw this behavior as a hobby, or maybe a secret. I knew that I did not have a lot to add to the conversation. I listened religiously to NPR reports about the peaking recession. I could not imagine being hired for a job with a salary.

But then I embraced blogging, and if you blog hard enough, I guess, media can be a fairy tale. I moved to New York, worked other jobs, and started at The FADER after I quit them. I remember waiting on a subway platform with one coworker early on, telling him that I didn't feel like a writer. Looking back at things I published then, I can see that I *was*—just a very weird one, and not yet an editor, or trusting of editors. For this issue, my 30th, I've trimmed transcripts, asked for rewrites, and untangled passages. We booked manicurists and filled riders. I have sent texts that say 'nut graf' and also 'idk'. I've laughed out loud as I've done this, because for me it still does not come easy, and I am proud of our effort.

Today there are fewer music magazines than ever, which makes The FADER's job bigger. We are approached and accepted by people we may have not worked with years ago. At the same time, there are more ways, and more places, for artists to tell their own stories, without journalists, than ever before. So to have been entrusted with Drake's first major interview in more than a year, a delicate conversation about authorship and an album which is not yet done, was an honor and a burden. We did not want to disappoint. To write accurately and empathically but not pathetically about Rihanna, with her consent but without any actual quotes, was a maddening puzzle. All FADER stories require finesse but these were scarier. To work at FADER today is to keep knocking your head against what you have not yet taught yourself and other constraints, and to be satisfied only when you've tried your hardest, which may not actually be enough. This project is somehow twice the page count of our usual issues, but I am still finding it hard to feel finished.

FADER 100 is a celebration of big changes in music and media and, honestly, of the people that were most exciting to me. Years from now, when our work on today's internet has vanished, maybe this will be a good primer on how the wall between pop and underground was vaporized, what being first to discover something used to mean, or how print magazines were made. And my hope is that, if we've successfully honored the standard of the old FADER stuff I loved, someone will be inspired by an idea that we defined nicely here, or that we've been blogging about. I hope they'll feel it is possible for them to become a music journalist, or to have something to add to the conversation. And if they want to prove that no challenge is insurmountable, I hope they'll feel like The FADER is home.

Naomi Zeichner
Editor-in-Chief


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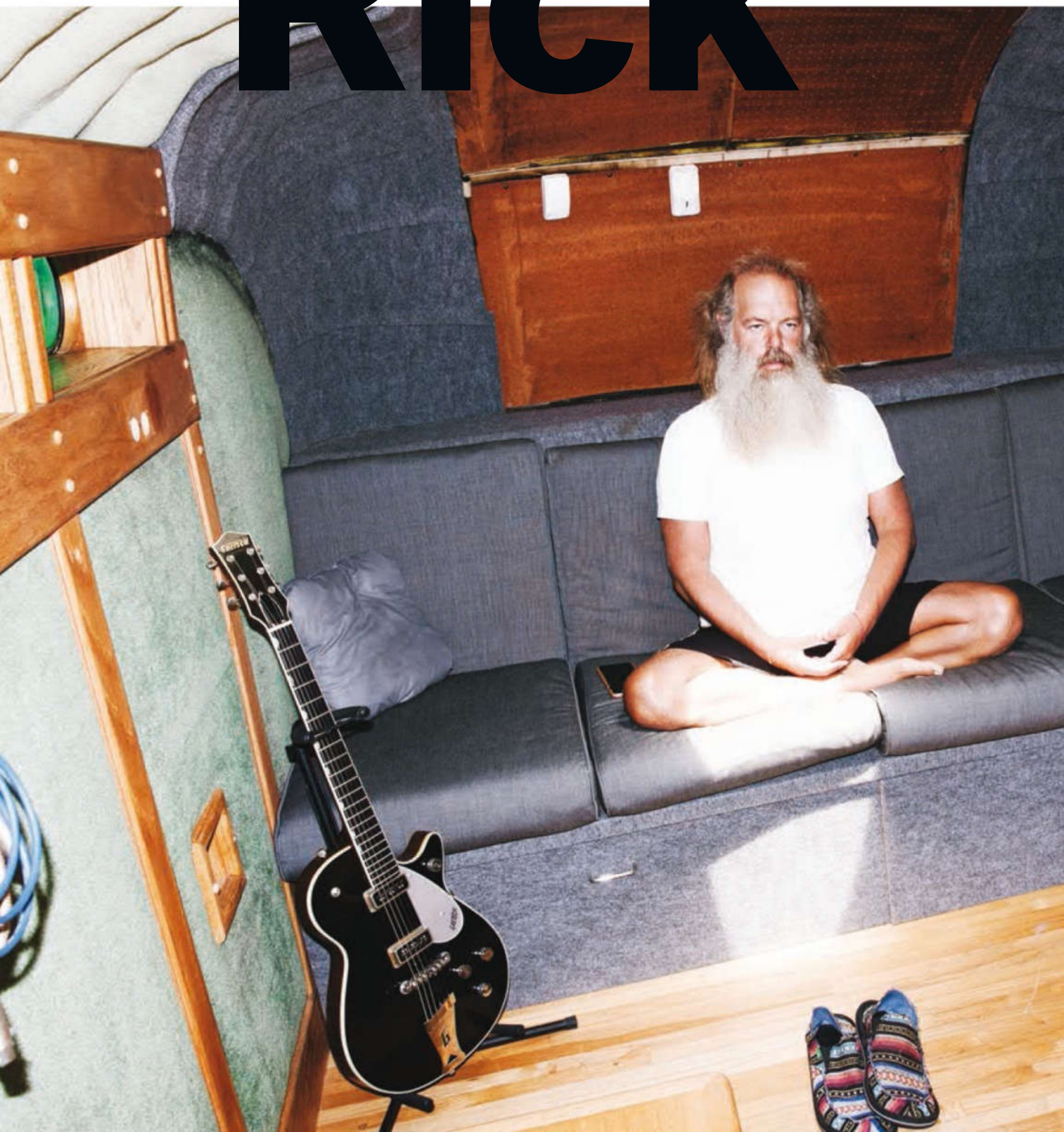

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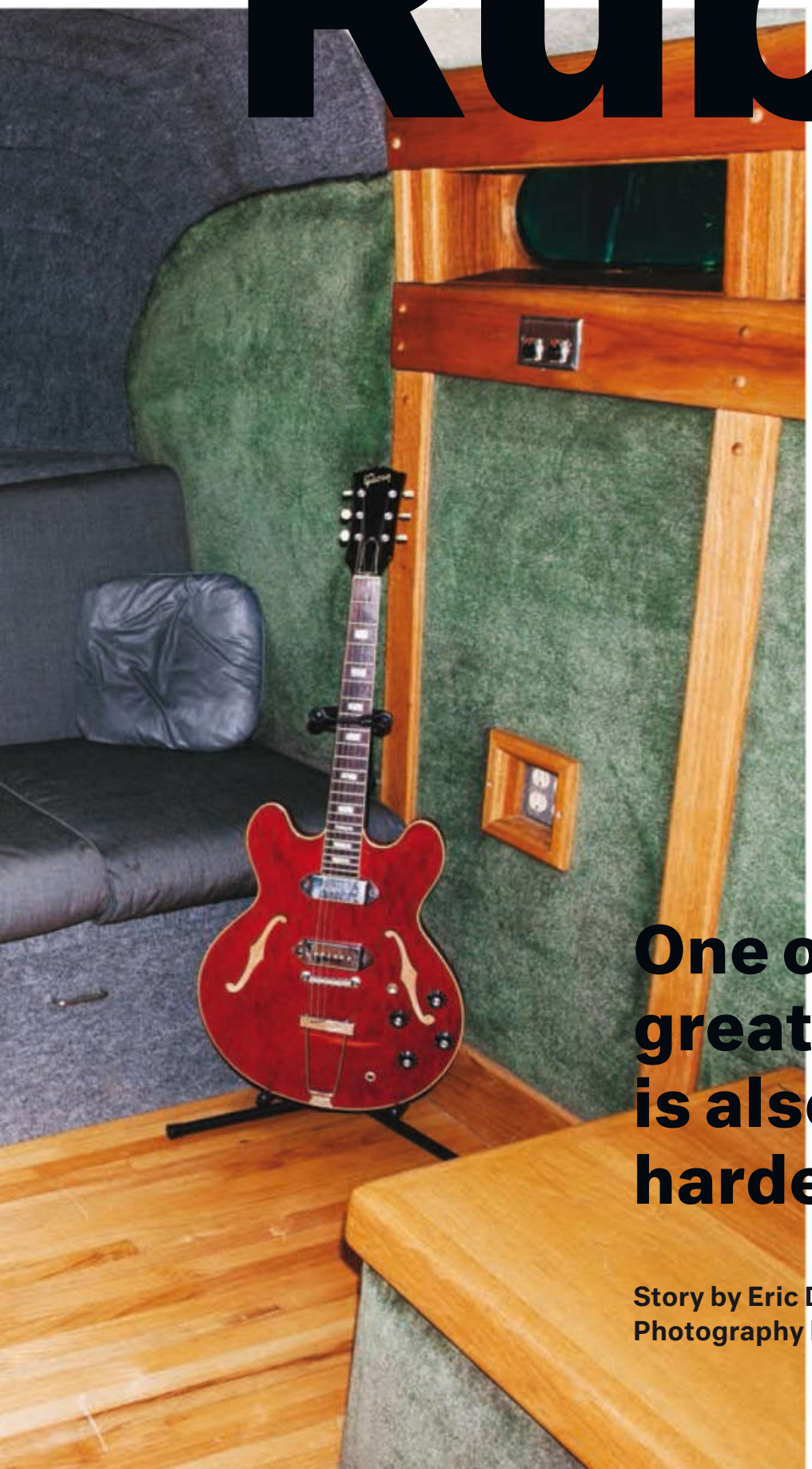
These masters of their crafts—producers, prodigies, radicals—were blessed with the good ears to know what will work and the good sense to stick to their guts if ever the world disagreed. How do you sustain a creative life? Here are six ways.

Good Ears

Rick



Rubin



One of music's greatest producers is also one of the hardest to copy

Story by Eric Ducker
Photography by Bryan Sheffield

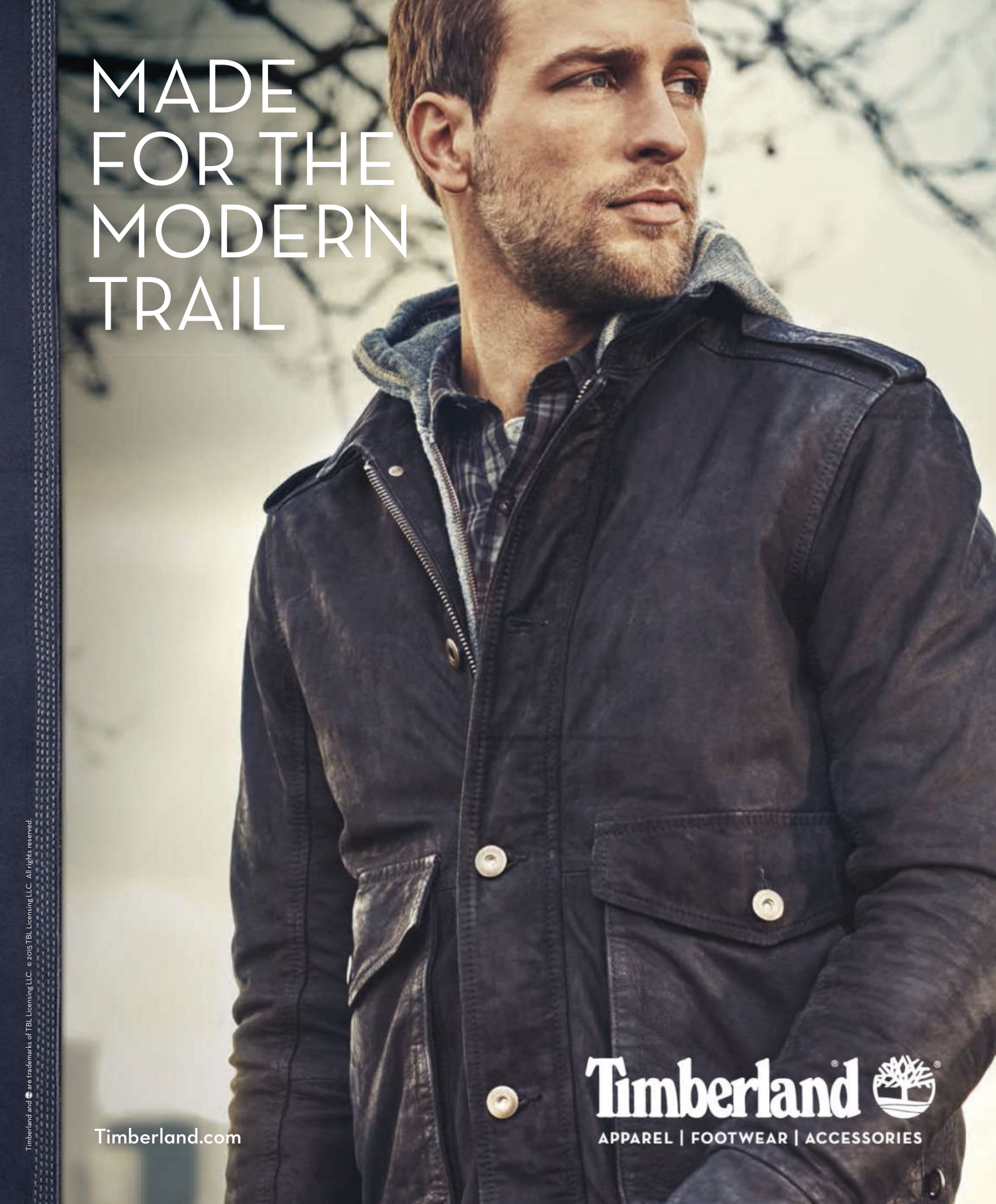
About 15 miles into Malibu's advertised "27 miles of scenic beauty," the Pacific Coast Highway bends to the right and delivers you to storied Zuma Beach, a Southern California landmark namechecked in songs by The Rolling Stones and Leon Ware. A little up the hill, overlooking Zuma's white sand and dazzling blue ocean, is Shangri-La, the musical headquarters of producer Rick Rubin. The studio was originally built in the mid-1970s by The Band and Bob Dylan, and the bus they once used to tour the country is still parked in the grass, its insides turned into an auxiliary recording space. Rubin bought Shangri-La in 2011 and had nearly every surface painted white, save for the pastel pink tile countertops in the kitchen and bathroom.

Shangri-La seems to be a perfect fit for 52-year-old Rubin at this stage of his career. The hirsute, leather-jacketed Long Islander who started Def Jam from his NYU dorm room, brought a traditional pop song structure to hip-hop, and served as a bad influence on the Beastie Boys is now 30 years older. These days, Rubin walks around shoeless in a white T-shirt and black shorts that don't make it to his knees, his long hair completely bleached out by age and hours spent in the Pacific Ocean. He is tanned and tranquil in his isolation.

Before he settled in Malibu, Rubin had produced music for acts including Slayer, Johnny Cash, Jay Z, Tom Petty, the Dixie Chicks, and Justin Timberlake. More recently, under Rubin's stewardship, Shangri-La has hosted sessions for superstars like Eminem and Black Sabbath. His work as the executive producer of Kanye West's *Yeezus*, where he helped reduce several sprawling hours of material into a minimalist 10-track album under severe time constraints, has brought him a new wave of notoriety. He's continued to work with developing artists along with legends—recently, he hosted James Blake for the first album the singer will record largely outside of his home studio.

Rubin is a nontraditional producer. He doesn't play any instruments, and he can't operate a mixing board or a Pro Tools setup. In fact, he seems to be actively uninterested in spending much time in a recording studio. Instead, Rubin is best known for his talents as a listener, with his ability to offer insightful notes on how artists can improve their songs. He's a kind of psychological problem-solver, skilled at getting artists to a creative place where they can record and finish the best album they can deliver. Here, Rubin discusses his uncommon approach to his uncommon job.





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How do you find new music now?
Usually online. I find myself on SoundCloud a lot. Also, I guess you'd call them trusted sources—friends who have similar tastes who might say, "Have you heard so-and-so?" I wouldn't say I go out of the way to find it—it's more like I carry on my natural "interested in things" life and new music finds its way into it. If I made a concerted effort to find new music, it would get in the way of finding the best new music. By not really looking, I feel like I'm finding it for the right reason.

How did you find out about Shangri-La?
I lived very close by and I was making an album with Weezer, and they said, "We found this studio around the corner called Shangri-La, and we rented it for a month and we're going to rehearse there." At the time it was not in very good condition. I didn't know whether the studio sounded good or not. We do these blind tests: I sent an engineer around to all of these different studios—studios that we normally work in and new contenders like Shangri-La—with the same kick and snare drum, the same microphones, and, at the time, a DAT recorder. The instruments and equipment are the exact same in all the tests; the only thing that changes is the room and the air in the room. Then we listen without knowing which is which and decide which studio suits the projects. Shangri-La won one of those projects, and I was shocked because at the time I wouldn't have guessed anything would have come out sounding good. When it became available and someone was going to buy it and tear it down, I ended up buying it to save it, just because I didn't want to see it go away.

"A great piece of work is a chapter in your life."

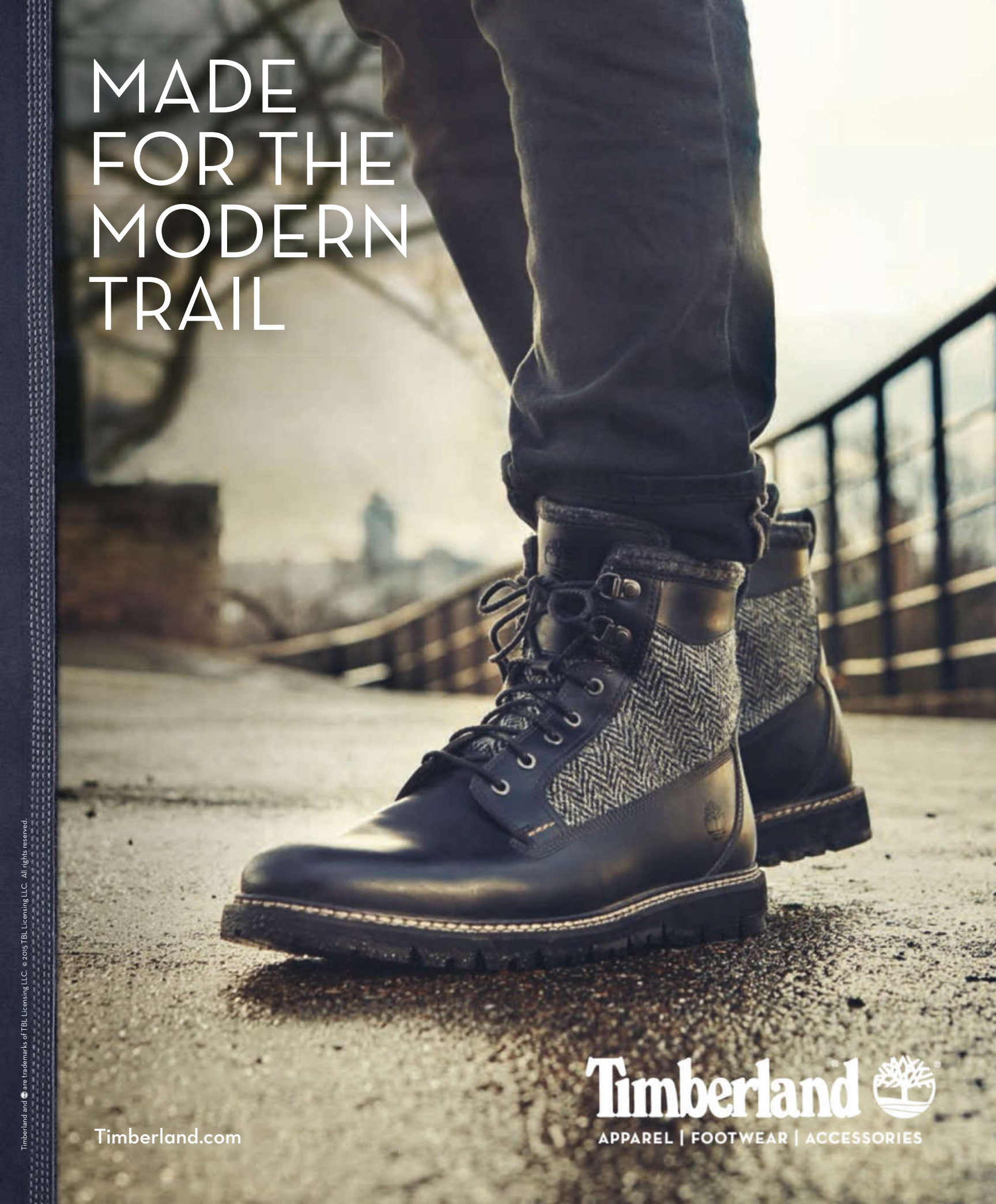
There's a reason that some studios survive for forty or fifty years and others are gone in five. In the older days of studio-building, there was a different skill set involved. It was less technical and more artistic. There would be guys with great ears who would know how to tune the room and make it work. Current studios are computer-rendered spaces, which often sound very cold and clinical. They don't have the same sort of magical sound. A lot of cool stuff was done here in the '70s: The Band and Eric Clapton and Bob Dylan. Neil Young came to visit maybe three weeks ago, and he said he played "Cortez the Killer" for Bob Dylan for the first time in this room.

Are new artists excited to record there?
Some are. There's a very calm vibe here. Most artists don't want to leave, and they find it a conducive place to get work done. When I say calmness, it's a lack of outside distraction. Without having outside voices or TVs on, it's like being in a protected womb where you can really be vulnerable—not reacting to something on the outside, but being more you.

Your approach is usually based on everyone taking their time. But working on *Yeezus*, there was an insane deadline. Was that exciting for you or something you wouldn't want to deal with again?
It was fun and it gave me insight into the way Kanye works. That's his method of getting something finished: he likes to try different versions, so there's always another version to try. If you have a hard deadline, it's gotta be done, so it motivates him. I tend not to work that way. Now, having experienced it, I feel like I can be of better service to him.

You're often called in when an artist needs someone to say, "This is how we're going to get you back to where you can be your best." Why do artists need that kind of outside help?
There are so many outside distractions, especially if an artist goes from being a kid with no success to all of a sudden having some success. There's baggage that comes with that, which really gets in the way of the creative process. And there are not many people who can support them through that because most people involved tend to have a shorter-term view that will not be the best for the artist over the long haul. It's very unusual for someone to have success and then just be able to deal with it. Anything you can do to be more grounded and rooted in yourself is probably a good thing—things like meditation.

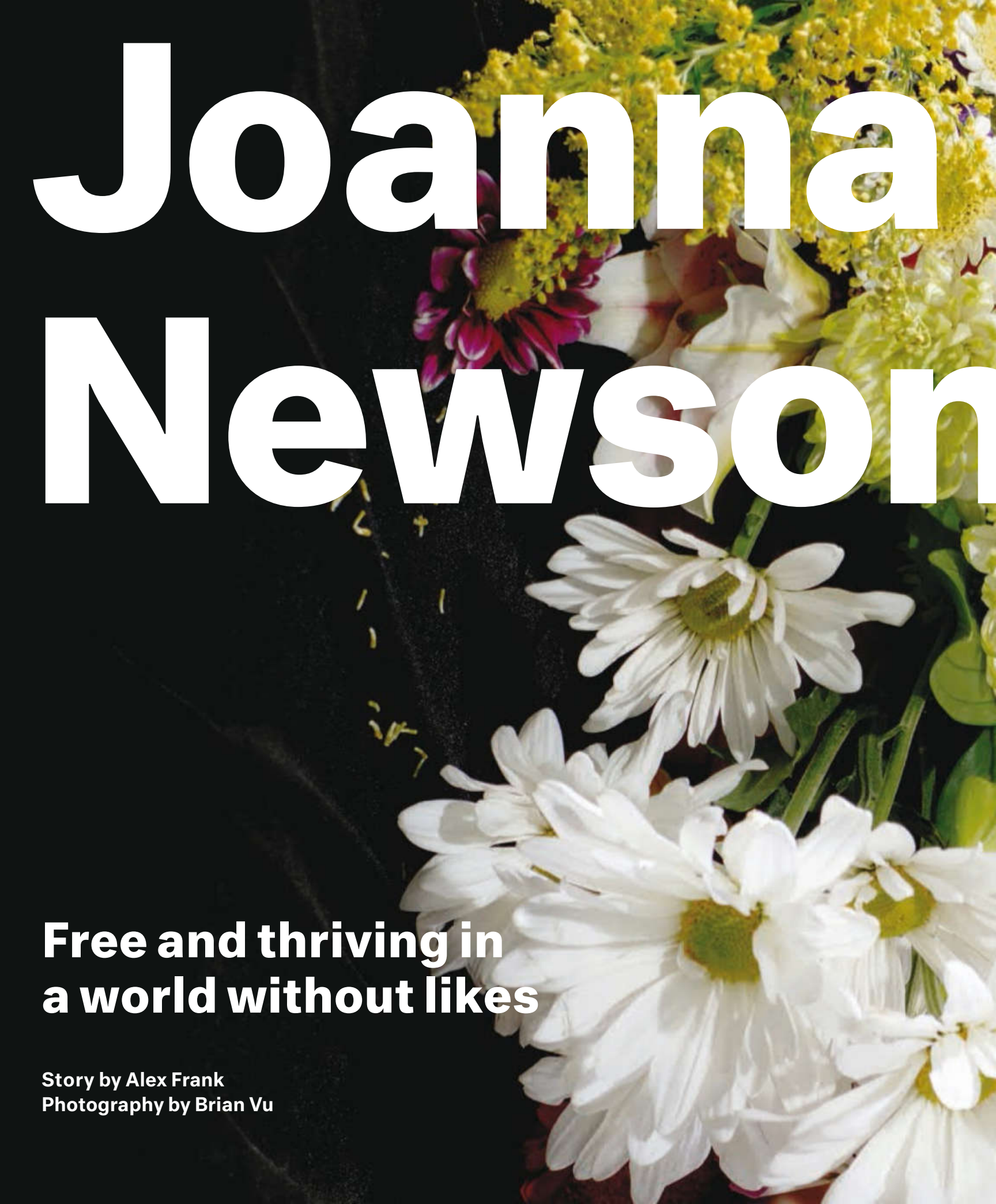
Is it possible to work on an album for too long? You've said D'Angelo's *Voodoo* is one of your favorite albums. Not to diminish *Black Messiah*—which is great—but I can't help but wonder how much great material he left behind.
A great piece of work is a chapter or a moment in your life. If you go past that and into the next moment of your life, the music is going to change. There is something about keeping the chapters coming because, if you wait too long, you're just going to be missing chapters. It's not that now you're finally making the great thing that you started eight years before; you're probably just making the eighth year's chapter at that point. There is something about keeping some sort of a flow and working as hard as you can to make the best stuff you can, and if the material is not there, go back and write more. There is something about there being another chapter and saying, "This is where I am now. And this is where I am tomorrow. And this is where I am next time."


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Joanna Newsom

Free and thriving in a world without likes

Story by Alex Frank
Photography by Brian Vu





Since she began her closely watched career over 10 years ago, Joanna Newsom has remained independent in a way few other musicians have. She's a stalwart for strange, specific folk in an era when even the most underground artists are flirting with pop. Her lyrics are winding and allegorical, her harp old-world, her voice piquant, her rhythms complex. Newsom's albums—including *Divers*, her first in five years—move through time like an E.L. Doctorow novel, spinning grand inspirations from literature and history into music that feels personal even when there is uncertainty about what she is actually singing about. Written plainly on a piece of paper, her words read like a kind of Middle English that only she can translate.

In preparing to speak to her, I made the mistake of researching the endless annotations that fans have made for her lyrics online. "Baby Birch," for example, an uncharacteristically sparse song from 2010's *Have One on Me*, has been interpreted by close-readers as being about abortion. Newsom has never discussed it, and though the lyrics seem to point to that interpretation, they are just left of center enough that the bittersweet gift of ambiguity remains. "We tell ourselves stories in order to live," Joan Didion, a smart Californian just like Newsom, once wrote. But what if, at least in music, the stories that give songs magic are the listener's as much as the artist's? If Newsom's songs recall painful or happy memories from our own lives, isn't that enough?

Newsom, who is 33 and married to comedian Andy Samberg, doesn't always take herself as seriously as some of us do. She appeared on *Portlandia* in 2012, poking fun at the fact that she's chosen to make her life's work the harp, a ridiculously impractical instrument. She ventured further into acting this year, playing the burnout narrator of Paul Thomas Anderson's hippie noir *Inherent Vice*. Late in the summer, we met in the lobby of the Gramercy Park Hotel, a stately stone hideaway in the middle of busy Manhattan. In conversation, she is light and funny and regular. She has never gone pop, never gone soft, never given up on being the cool, complicated weirdo she has been since the very beginning.

You seem to have a kind of independence that many people just do not.
Creatively, yes. I have plenty of limitations in other parts of my life. It's just that there is one particular thing that is inviolable: I have a, if not religious, superstitious position when it comes to music and writing. It's the one thing that is unscathed through all the shittiness. It was never a conscious choice to be free or uncompromising. It is, and was, the thing that's worth doing for me. It's worth my time.

You figured out how to only do the kind of music you wanted to do, and nothing else.
I got lucky. I'd be dead in the water if I hadn't ended up on Drag City. It's not like I spoke to 10 labels and picked the one that was the best fit for me. I ended up with this one label that in retrospect, 12 years down the line, is the only one I could've been with for so long. I made *Milk-Eyed Mender* [in 2004], and then they basically consented to fund this weird five-song record with full orchestra recorded with tape, which I think at that point had been their most expensive record, and they never questioned it. They never questioned me making a three-record album to follow that one. They never questioned how long it took me to make this record, how many steps, how many layers. And they don't ever ask me to do anything that's corny. No negativity to anyone who enjoys social media, but from a marketing strategy, a lot of people feel like they have to do it. Drag City doesn't ask that of me, or to do anything that feels wrong.

Did you ever think about "selling out"?
No one was ever like, "Kid, we're going to make you a star!" But there was a period of time when I was getting calls from major labels, and they were offering a number that they calculated to be impressive to someone like me. And they were right, it was impressive. But I also knew there was no reason they would offer that number unless they thought they could make it back off of me. I honestly think, if I had found myself on a label, especially in my early 20s, that was less supportive of my instincts and less principled, I totally might have ended up doing some corny shit. Because if someone in a position of authority and experience tells you, "This is what everyone does, this is how it's done," at that age, I would've believed them.

How do you account for your continued success?
By many standards, what I have is not success. I'm perfectly happy with it, but if it was a company going public, I'd be doing very poorly. When people start to do things arbitrarily to grow that audience, and those choices are compromises, there's a stink that their audience can smell, and it's really hard to get off. I was really unnerved at the beginning of my career, when people who weren't the best fit for my music were being steered toward it because it was a pop-cultural moment when that kind of music was being talked about.

Are you talking about the freak folk scene that you were lumped in with in the 2000s?
Yes, this odd media construction. It wasn't offensive, it was just so not accurate. That was a weird hot seat that I was in that I didn't really like. There was this narrative about me in the first five years that was like, "You love her or you hate her." That was this synthetic thing—people were being forced to have an opinion. I'm much more comfortable now: put it out, and the people who are going to like it like it. There's no zeitgeist-y thing telling them what to do. It's definitely a relief to not even be remotely burdened by coolness. Nothing ages more badly than being cool. For me, there's nothing to maintain. I can just continue doing what I do.

Do you like contemporary music?
Of what's popular, I think I like rap more than most indie, I'll tell you that. I don't have a problem with music that's written with a synthetic or electronic instrument. But I do certainly hate the complete garbage that is most EDM music. Couldn't be worse if it went out of its way to try.

Is your writing process serious or fun?
What is fun for me to do with language

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"Nothing ages more badly than being cool."



is deadly serious for me as well. I tend to start with melody and chords, which take a while to resolve into calcified arrangements. Basic melody, basic chords—those are born from some feeling or narrative idea or both. I have the prompt for the lyrics before I have the lyrics.

Some songs, I work with placeholder lyrics for months until I find the exact wording. With certain songs, there are requirements that the lyrics have to fit. For "Leaving the City," on *Divers*, the choruses have three different patterns that are interlacing. Those lyrics are somewhat simple, but they took me a really long time. They had to tell a story, but they had to incorporate these syntactic parameters. There was a straight-up chart I drew. I had to have certain rhymes that were there because they emphasized the downbeat of a contrary meter that was overlaid on the primary dominant meter of the song. Then there were contrapuntal syllabic emphases. Then there were the basic rhymes at the end of each line, which were anchor rhymes. And I needed that to happen in a way that said what we wanted to say.

That sounds like a lot of work. Is the sheer labor of your music part of why people search for so much meaning within it?
People know I put a lot into it. And if I leave 8,000 bread crumbs around my door, I can't blame anyone for knocking on it.

Does heavy interpretation do a disservice to the music?
I love that there are people who listen at that level. It helps slightly soften the blow of the existential horror—it's an incredibly creatively validating thing. But there's not a wrong or a right way. I'm not comfortable with the idea that anyone needs to "get" the songs to get the songs. I don't want to clomp all over that with my heavy-booted definitive statement on what it was supposed to be.

What did you want to say on *Divers*?
If I could say it all the way, I wouldn't have bothered making a record. I will say that there's a thematic core of the album—every song on the record is asking some version of the same question.

The whole record is personal, but a lot of what is most personal is conveyed through pure fiction or, sometimes, even science fiction—literally sci-fi. With "Waltz of the 101st Lightborne," I'm contrasting this British Isles sea shanty with a narrative in which I'm talking about colonizing alternate iterations of the terrestrial position in the multiverse. Colonizing time sideways, front and back, traveling in four directions through time.

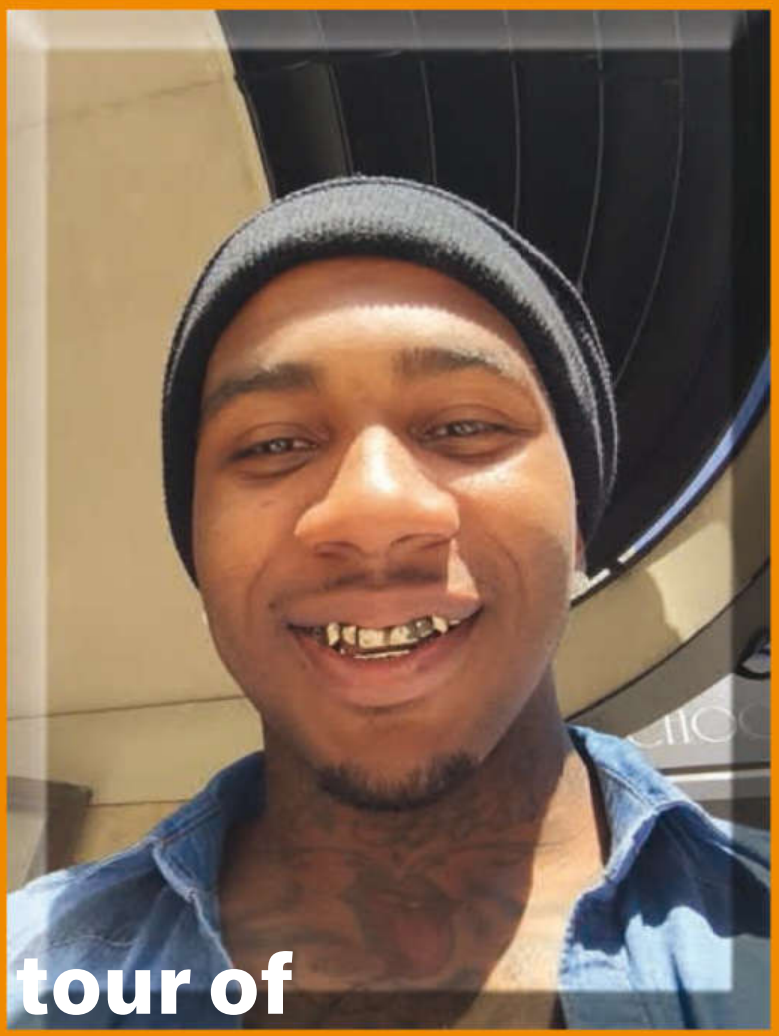
The subject matter is some of the heaviest and occasionally saddest I've ever explored. It's linked to mortality and the idea of getting older. Time runs through every single song. But it was also the most fun to make. There's no way to know someone except to know them.

Has building this entire aesthetic universe been a form of escapism from the modern world for you?
It's not that contrarian. It hasn't been that much work to not be on Twitter or Instagram. All you have to do is not do it. I'm not wearing a burlap sack, walking in the wilderness, talking to animals. I'm in the world. I just do everything real slow, and I don't have enough hours in the day to do that stuff and still get anything done. It would've taken me ten years instead of five to get this album done.



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Lil B



A guided tour of based world, led by rap's most provocative thinker

Story by Duncan Cooper
Photography by Brandon McCartney

Who could've dreamt up a guy like Lil B? Recently, the 25-year-old rapper born Brandon McCartney was on MSNBC, supporting Bernie Sanders for the upcoming presidential election. A week prior, he'd appeared on CNN, assuring a reporter he wouldn't level a curse against Hillary Clinton, Sanders' opponent in the primaries. That's just what he'd done months before, condemning a basketball player named James Harden for using his signature cooking dance without thanking him for it. Harden's team flunked out of the playoffs, and Lil B was the toast of the sports media, as pundits from ESPN and FOX Sports pledged allegiance in some kind of mock deference.

But how mocking was it? Who else has accomplished what Lil B has? The unsigned rapper from unsung Berkeley, California, commands a Twitter following well over a million, for whom he's known to tweet daily affirmations. (I'll never forget this gem from November 14, 2010: "all my people that have mild depression or severe dont worry because theres someone that loves u! and hes a rapper with gold teeth —Lil B.") As he's quick to point out, he follows a million people back, too, all by his own hand—no help from a manager or publicist, which he says he's never had. At 19, he published a self-help book, and he has lectured to packed rooms at NYU and MIT. And above all, over the past six years, across dozens of mixtapes and at least one self-produced instrumental album, Lil B has released over 100 hours of free music.

In all of this is, he has cultivated the philosophy of "based," which, as he told *Complex* in 2010, is loosely defined as "turning a negative into a positive"—embracing stereotypes so as to invert them for good. In practice, that leads to a lot of contradictions. Lil B is responsible for some of rap's most warmhearted songs of all time—including two called "I Love You"—and some of the genre's most demeaning. He calls himself a feminist and has tweeted frequently about gender equality, but he's also released "Child Support Me," an openly misogynistic song in which he threatens to slap and murder a woman for asking him to help care for their child. For every "Ban the Weapons" he puts out, there's another "Shoot a Gun." The ideas are so many, and at times so at odds with each other, that it's hard to know which to take seriously. Sometimes he expresses everything at once: on one recent song, "What's Next," he says he's "spraying [bullets] for peace."

Occasionally, fans call Lil B out for crossing some line, and he's been known to acknowledge his ignorance, point out the potential in himself to learn, and apologize. Not long before his appearance on MSNBC, he tweeted a joke about transgender people. He was criticized for it online and, shortly after, admitted to being transphobic, then used part of his airtime to urge for greater protections of LGBT communities. More stirring than any concert, perhaps this is Lil B's greatest performance: to stand as proof that anyone can get better.

In his very acts of intolerance—both intentional and unwitting—Lil B implicitly preaches acceptance of intolerant people. His fondness for provocation makes him something like a free speech advocate, defending the right to say the wrong thing. Still, one hopes for just a little more—that a man so outspoken about learning, justice, and equality could educate himself *before* he needs to be corrected, to find a way of being that precludes the need to apologize. It's easy to say "I love you." It's harder to act like you mean it. In this rare, wide-ranging interview, I ask Lil B to explain his confusing approach to preaching positivity. Is he a genius, two steps ahead, or merely a guru perched atop a mountain of cognitive dissonance? Can a person be both?

When you were a teenager, your group The Pack was signed to a major label. But as a solo artist, you've never wanted that. Why not?
It's not that I never did, I just knew I could do things myself, and I liked having control of the Lil B experience. I wasn't trying to split up anything with nobody. I don't have any contracts, so I don't have to split any money up. That was my main thing—just making sure I'm taking care of myself and taking care of Lil B. Just learning to survive, for myself and as a human in America. I'm definitely not opposed to major labels.

Why do it yourself then?
That's just naturally how it came. As an artist, I just loved hearing my verses. I loved hearing myself rap. And I'm an only child.

What did your mom think of you becoming a rapper?
She was not the biggest supporter and not the biggest motivator of me personally. She didn't really believe in my dreams until I made her believe in them. But she came around once she saw people starting to gravitate toward me.

Where did "based" come from? As The Pack, you called yourselves "based boys."
It really came from tripping, just tripping out. It was something that we all embraced, and it was something that I really took to heart. I just took it to that next level, just with being loyal to based.

When did Based God start being a thing?
After I started based freestyling. Just spending a lot of time learning about myself and entering a higher level within my mind. I was exploring my mind, and I ended up finding the Based God.

For years, you released music almost constantly—a new mixtape every month. But that's slowed down recently. Why?
I wanted to live a little bit this year. I wanted to refocus my meditation and get in tune with the art, in tune with the music. In order to get new things to rap about, you've gotta live. I don't want to force anything.

With your TV appearances, a lot of people are getting to know you from things besides music. Does that worry you?
Nah, it doesn't worry me. My music speaks for itself. I've always had a plan. All this is just extra for me. It's not like I asked for it.

Do you think you'll write another book?
Yup, always in the process. Been in the process for years now. People definitely want it, but I'm keeping it private and putting that away.

How did you first come up with the idea to do lectures?
That was something that the student body wanted from me. Being mature, that was just something I was naturally gravitating towards, and something that I knew I wanted to do: to express my viewpoint and give lessons about how I'm thinking, what I care about. It's honest and natural.

You get paid, right?
Oh yeah, of course.

Does it pay better than doing a concert?
Ah, you see, I haven't been doing too many concerts this year, so you already know, man.

And you live pretty simply, too.
I'm a real guy. I'm not money-laundering. I make money off music, and music is my source of income. It feels good. I'm not selling T-shirts, I'm not doing none of that other crap. Straight music.

You get pretty upset when people sell merchandise with your name on it.
Yeah, because people are lame, man. I've seen y'all write about some girl who did some dress for her college, and Katy Perry wore it. Man, tell her to calm down. I don't ask people to make—you know what I mean? Everybody keeps making stuff of me. Why don't you make something else? Chill.

Don't you think it's out of love?
Nah, because they're selling it. It ain't out of love. If it's out of love, make it and wear it, but keep it to yourself. I saw something for $1,000 or something? Get a life.

Your issue with James Harden was him doing the cooking dance without acknowledging you. Why does it feel so disrespectful for someone to do your dance?
I don't have a team working for me. No publicist, no manager, no label. It's all me. It's all real. I am Lil B. You called me directly. When you do things differently, you take things personally.

At the same time, you don't always credit producers, and you've said you don't pay for beats, either.
I mean, I never ask people to send me beats. These producers send me beats because they want Lil B to bring them to life. If producers want credit, send those beats to people who will give them credit. There's only a couple people that kept it real, and they know who they are. All these producers, they try to come into Based World and say, "I produced for Lil B," and try to reap the benefits of that—they didn't do anything.

That's just surprising to me, since you want credit for the dance but won't credit the guy who made the beat for it. Why is that?
Because I'm real hip-hop, I'm real rap, I'm an MC. I record over MP3s. Send the beats, send a piece of rock, and I'll make it a hit.

A few years ago, you said you were going to wear the same pair of Vans until you made a million dollars. Is that still your goal?
I mean, that's not the only goal. That hasn't really been on my mind. I just keep it real. My thing is getting back to the music, because people really want that. Getting back in Basedworld Studios. But the shoes—I haven't ditched them. Still wear them.

Do you live with anybody?
Nah. Definitely not.

You were at the gym earlier today, which I want to point out because I think a lot of people have a perception of you just sitting on the computer all day.
Definitely. When you follow a million-plus people on Twitter by your hands, by yourself, no bots, you've gotta take a little break and do other things. I don't want to get arthritis. Plus I'm a writer, too, so you've gotta take it easy.

I've heard people say that you must have other people writing your tweets, because there's just so many.
That's disrespectful, man. People gotta stop disrespecting me. That's crazy.

How often are you recording now? You mentioned recently that you'd been out of the studio for months.
I'm always working, though. I'm always working.

Your music has always been about contradictions, expressing love on one song and hate on another. What's that about for you, to always do both?
It's just my personality. You've just gotta know me. You have to wait to see my plans. Everything has always been planned out. You have to just wait to see what I've got in store.

When your songs are the opposite of your personality on Twitter or in your lectures, I think it's hard for people to understand.
I can't be fake, you know. I just have to do what feels natural to me. That's just what I do.

Particularly the way you talk about women in your songs—you say things that are sexist to the point where I feel like you'd be mad at yourself. Why do you do that?
It's art. Some people like R-rated movies.

I'm surprised you say that, when you talk so passionately about loving everyone.
I truly care about people, and I know I'm not perfect. Half of my life was about acquiring street knowledge and being inquisitive. I think that's important.

"Some people like R-rated movies."

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You rapped a lot early on about how you were facing jail.
That's when I was a teenager. I was probably 15 years old. My brain was just developing, and I was trying to be accepted, figure out my place in society. That's why I feel for young kids. They've got a lot that they go through, situations that they have to learn from and make it out of. That was a real learning period and definitely something that's a part of me, but it doesn't define me.

Did you finish high school?
I haven't finished yet, but I'm looking forward to finishing.

Where did your love of animals come from?
Even from a young age, I would pick out dogs that were looking for adoption on the weekend and let them stay with me. I'd take them out for the weekends and hang out with them, let them stay at the house. Shout out to dog fans. The love of animals is always there with me.

And you made a song with your cat.
That's Keke, an adopted tabby cat, the first animal in hip-hop. We've got some stuff in the works. I mean, a cat has a personality. It has feelings, and I can sense that. It's like having a kid or a family member.

Are you a vegetarian?
No, but I respect the vegan lifestyle. One day I might be doing it. We're all a work in progress. No one's perfect. There's things I have to deal with that I was born into that I might not totally agree with. I'm learning, re-learning, figuring out better ways to survive.

What else did you learn growing up that you're trying to change?
I think all of my family believe in what Americans believe in, but nothing was really forced upon me, except when I was younger. Catholic school, that was forced upon me. Other than that, nothing much.

Do you believe in God?
Definitely.

You do this thing on Twitter called Girl Time, basically asking women to send you pictures. What's going on there?
That's something about the person that I am. That's just something that's just to me. It's something you've gotta keep to the neck. But that was something that happened really organically.

What is the point of it? What do you do with the pictures?
For me, what I think Girl Time is about is just showing the beauty in every woman. Every single piece of beauty. What I think it's about—I'm not the only person that's involved in Girl Time, but it definitely helps. My perspective about Girl Time is just about showing all beauty.

This is what I was talking about before—how do you say that and then say what you say on "Child Support Me"?
I mean, sometimes you just say things because you aren't going to do them. I would rather just say something, you know, than actually do it. You should talk about things and let them out.

On Twitter, you've apologized really earnestly when people have called you out, like after your joke about being trans.
Yeah, I love that people are really paying attention and really respond and care what I talk about. There are things where I have fun and throw out my personality, and so I might say something that might not be as tasteful or totally representative of my morals or whatever. That was a slick joke, and then you learn.

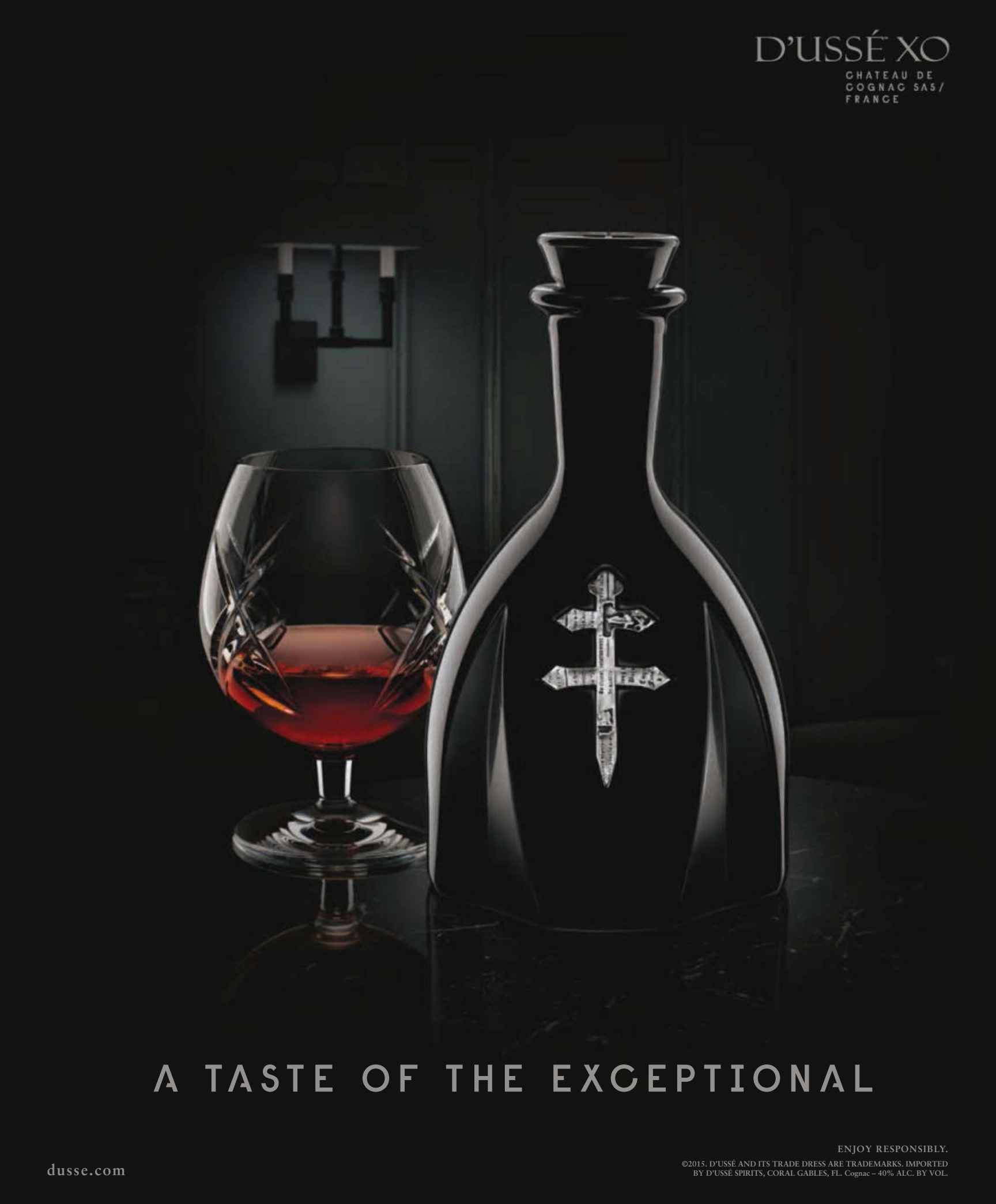
My favorite songs of yours are also the most positive. They can be really hopeful.
You know, that's why I make them. It's a personal experience, and people gravitate to different ones for different reasons, but it's all from the heart.

You have multiple songs called "I Love You." Why is that an important thing to say?
It's always a balance. I like to be transparent, and I like to be honest. I think you'd be more disappointed if I didn't make a song like "Child Support," if you thought I was only one way but I was also really another. It's all true.



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Diplo

Pop's problem child has done wrong, but he keeps getting things right

Story by Duncan Cooper
Photography by Meredith Jenks

When I was 18 and started putting on concerts at my college, the first one we booked was Diplo. The school was a few miles outside Philadelphia, where he had made a name for himself as one half of the DJ duo Hollertronix. At the time, his groundbreaking mixtape with M.I.A., *Piracy Funds Terrorism*, was just a few months old. I was obsessed with the internet-fueled idea that there were no longer any boundaries in music—Baltimore club remixes of new wave, Bone Crusher into baile funk. I thought mashups were meaningful, and he was basically my hero. I remember walking up to him, in our makeshift backstage behind the school cafeteria, and telling him, "I just wanted to say thanks."

When I called Diplo for this interview, I recounted that story with requisite embarrassment, and the 36-year-old DJ and producer born Thomas Wesley Pentz laughed and said, "Not a lot of people thank me anymore." While his love for global party music—and deftness at repurposing it for his own gain—made him one of the past decade of pop music's most prescient figures, it also made him one of the most reviled: a white guy on a world safari. Diplo has often been his own worst enemy, whether he's mouthing off about Taylor Swift or missing a meeting with Beyoncé because he's locked up after a bar fight. But in all of this, he's also proven unsinkable.

These days, Diplo has not only outlasted many of his critics, but ascended beyond their reach. His aptly named 2014 compilation, *Random White Dude Be Everywhere*, featured a mockup of his Twitter account showing 7 billion followers—a world's worth. He runs a successful label, Mad Decent, and he's done beats for Chris Brown, Snoop Dogg, and Madonna, alongside more free-spirited work with his groups Major Lazer and Jack Ü, both of which released platinum singles in 2015. He isn't playing cafeterias anymore; he's arguably the world's most in-demand DJ. With that in mind, we discussed his rise, endurance, and what his teenage self would think of him now.

How did you make the transition from being a local party DJ to having music as your full-time job?

When I was younger, I didn't know anybody who made a living as a DJ. I just couldn't imagine it. Nowadays, kids can put a song on YouTube, and they'll have the biggest presence. So back in Philly, I was doing everything I could do, making a little bit of money from a nine-to-five, renting out little VFWs, and doing DJ gigs. I was like, "I'll be a writer, I'll be a filmmaker." I didn't have any real goal.

When I look back at pictures of Hollertronix, I see nobody dressed cool. It was like there was no word "hipster" yet. People were wearing the clothes they went to work in, or they were coming from University of the Arts. Eventually, we got people who were like, "Oh, I want to do this party in New York City, I want to do this party in San Francisco." They paid me to fly, and I had no overhead.

When that started taking off, all I did was put my money towards bad investments like Mad Decent and the *Favela on Blast* documentary. It was about five years before we broke even with Mad Decent. I was spending between 10 and 50 grand a year just to pay people's salaries to stay at the label to work. In the end, those were great things to spend money on, but back then everyone said, "What are you doing?" Over time, I learned how to market myself better. We broke even with Mad Decent, then started making money. And the whole time that I was traveling around DJing, I was learning how to produce records. I literally learned from start to finish how to make music in the last 10, 15 years.

Now you've got songs on the radio, but it seems like you're not DJing any less.

No, it's definitely busier. I just think that my time is managed a lot better now. This year, between Diplo, Major Lazer, and Jack Ü, and all the different acts, it's probably a good 350 shows with after-parties and stuff like that. Maybe two, three shows a day.

What is this calling that makes you want to play so many shows?

It's not really a calling. I think that it just works. Touring Major Lazer marketed the project, and it's a really hard project to market. Like, what is it, three guys that DJ together and make music? With Mad Decent Block Party, I'm the guy who's headlining most of them in one way or another, and that helps to increase the value of it. I just did one, two, three, four, five, six shows between Thursday and Sunday. That sounds really dizzy, but it wasn't that bad. I did press all day long yesterday, then today I'll be in the studio after this conversation. It's just a matter of managing your time. I know my time will run out soon, so I'm gonna try to do it as much as I can.

You've said before that you're an easy target for criticism, as a white guy working with a lot of people of color.

I don't really know what music I'm supposed to do. The first person I produced music for was M.I.A., and her music was basically a hodgepodge of everything, culturally. It was dancehall, it was R&B, it was punk—I just thought it was our music. I never thought for a minute, like, "What did it mean?" And that experience was my training ground for when I worked with rappers, or with Baltimore club music, or with the baile funk stuff. I've produced records for 2 Chainz. I did stuff for Skrillex's project. I worked in Jamaica with Popcaan and Kranium. When I go to Jamaica and do shows, 10,000 Jamaicans will go and say, "Yeah, we're fans of Major Lazer." I've done Korean pop records. To this day, I don't know what white music is. I influence people and they influence me. It's always a conversation back and forth with people.

Where did you get these ideas about production, the back-and-forth?

At the end of the day, I'm a DJ. It sounds silly, but people like Afrika Bambaataa are my heroes because nobody was doing what he did before he did it. No one told him you can't play Led Zeppelin. This was a guy who was mixing German records, rock records, electro records, and making his own records out of all that didn't exist beforehand. I loved DJ Premier, DJ Shadow. I loved groups like The Pharcyde, Wu-Tang Clan. Stuff from my middle school days really inspired me, like hearing Brand Nubian sample



“I’m just a little shitty-ass redneck kid that’s making music with Madonna.”

a slowed-down guitar. I was like, “Wow, there’s no rules to hip-hop at this point.” I was raised on dancehall too. I loved this guy named Lenky, who produced the Diwali riddim for Sean Paul. He was sampling little bits and pieces of culture, like Indian music or Western soundtracks, or soft rock guitars. I just loved the idea of anything goes. Who fucking cares? All this shit could get thrown into a pot and make something amazing.

It seems like your process is partly about finding something you can sell. Is that how you approached working with Justin Bieber? He wasn’t doing so hot before “Where Are Ü Now.”

For one thing, you’ve gotta understand that the music industry is different than the critic industry—the writers and the people that are talking about what is on trend or whatever. When you’re doing music, you’re always on trend or off trend, and it’s important to show people respect no matter what.

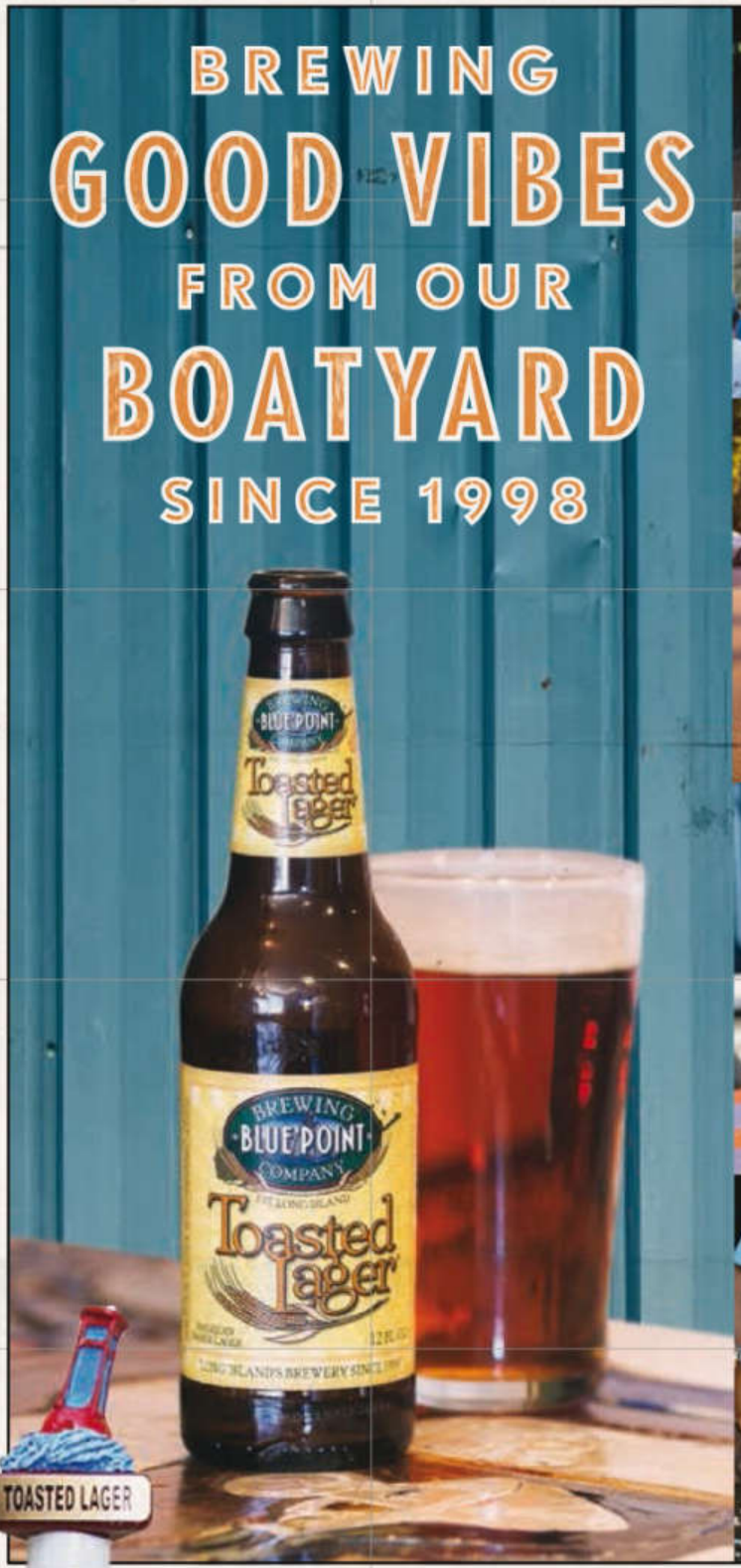
I met Bieber a few years ago, producing a record for him with Ariel Rechtshaid called “Thought of You.” I’ve known his manager, Scooter, for many years—he used to manage Kelis. They showed me respect back then and were really nice to me, so I always just kept them within arm’s length. They trusted me when I asked for a vocal. It was like a no-brainer. They had hit a place where nothing was working for them, and Justin had kinda hit rock bottom with things, like from the press, from jail, and from, like, taking his pants down at an awards show or something. I wasn’t even paying attention, but I know that he wasn’t very cool. And I was trying to really help Skrillex rebrand his own project, too. If nothing else, I thought working with Bieber would be the most noticeable thing we could do. It would be a great record, and it would make everyone really fucked up. It would make them really disappointed in themselves, and really confused, like, “How do I like this record?”

Even from day one, as I started to develop, I saw people’s perceptions of me as a producer, and they always want to put me in one box or another. Maybe that’s why I’m a target for things, because I don’t belong anywhere. If I make a record that makes people think that Justin Bieber is cool and makes them dance to it—which seems to be one of the most daunting tasks ever—then maybe people will rethink the way they think about music, you know? It’s not so dry and clear, what’s cool and what isn’t. Good music is going to be good music. He’s somebody you don’t want to like, but you like it.

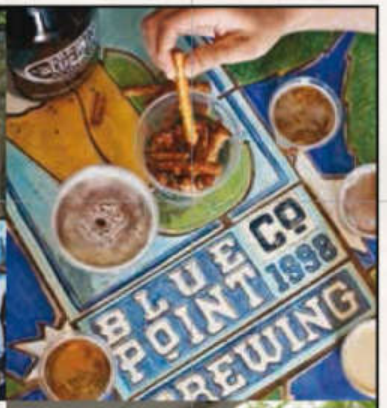
To some degree, you’ve had to work against your own personality, too, at least how you’ve acted on Twitter, right?

I don’t use Twitter to be obnoxious as much as I used to. I never considered Twitter to be anything more than just a joke for 10 years, then all of a sudden it was a news source for people. The fact that I even became peers with people like Tay-

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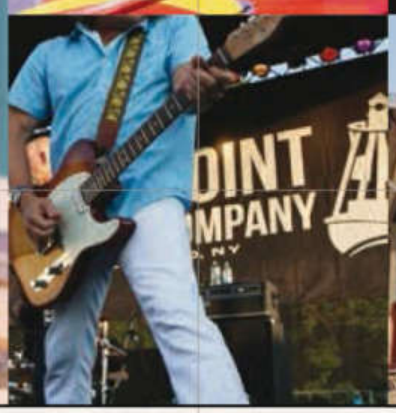


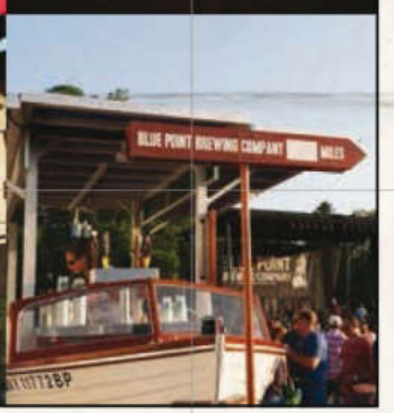














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lor Swift and pop stars, like, I never could even fathom that those people would look at my Twitter and be affected by it. That's when I realized I was disrespecting my records. Now I'm trying to put all of my energy toward music positively, through doing the right videos and doing the right shows and doing the right artwork and viral things we can do. Just being obnoxious on Twitter only gets you so far, and then people don't take your music seriously.

You've also been described as an anthropologist, both in a good way and a bad way.
You know, I went to school for anthropology, at Temple University. It was probably the worst major you could ever get. I ended up dropping out, but I took advantage of everybody and everything that I could in that place. I always felt like an anthropologist, and when I used to have to get people to write about my music, that actually worked in my favor—like, "Oh, this guy is doing Brazilian stuff." The images were exciting; the music was exciting. I knew it was the way to get people to write about me, and I just used the critics to my advantage. Now, critics are into you one day and not into you the next day. I haven't made music for critics in a long time. When they turned on me, I was already big enough to make music for fans, and I don't think my fans give a shit about anthropology.

The very idea of local scenes has really changed, too.
In New York, you used to have a rap sound and a rap scene. Now it's just like people are imitating Memphis rap or doing, like, Philly rap. The internet created—I can't believe Fetty Wap is from New Jersey. I didn't know where he was from. I heard him talk, and I'm like, "Oh my god." Everything is a mashup now, you know? You don't really know what is coming from where. Your favorite rapper might be from Ghana. The world has changed where nothing is as cut and dry. This is black, and this is white; this is from the South, and this is from the North; this belongs to Europe. Those rules are broken down, and I've always been an advocate of that, so I think I'm one of the guys who is able to take advantage.

A few years ago, you told *Interview*, "When I was 15 I used to run around reading *Adbusters* and dumpster diving, trying to find ways to make the U.S. government unwind into chaos through hardcore punk and metal." Do you still feel like that kid?
Well, the thing is, like—this is important. I lived in Daytona Beach. My family is from there. Daytona Beach has no culture—like, no youth culture, zero. The only thing that we had was a Barnes & Noble. I would go in the coffee shop there and read magazines and, like, Howard Zinn books. I was a real counterculture, anarchist kid. That was just me and my growing pains. But I always kept friends from that world and that era. In Philly, the underground scene really helped me become who I am. This one guy, Cullen Stalin, who owns an anarchist book store in Baltimore now—I give him some money every year and invest in his bookstore. I was in Europe when the Baltimore riots happened, and so I talked to him on the phone about it. Guys like him keep me sane. They think what I'm doing is an extension of punk rock because I'm just a little shitty-ass redneck kid that's making music with Madonna. It's almost like a joke to them, like I'm in disguise. I've never lost track of that.



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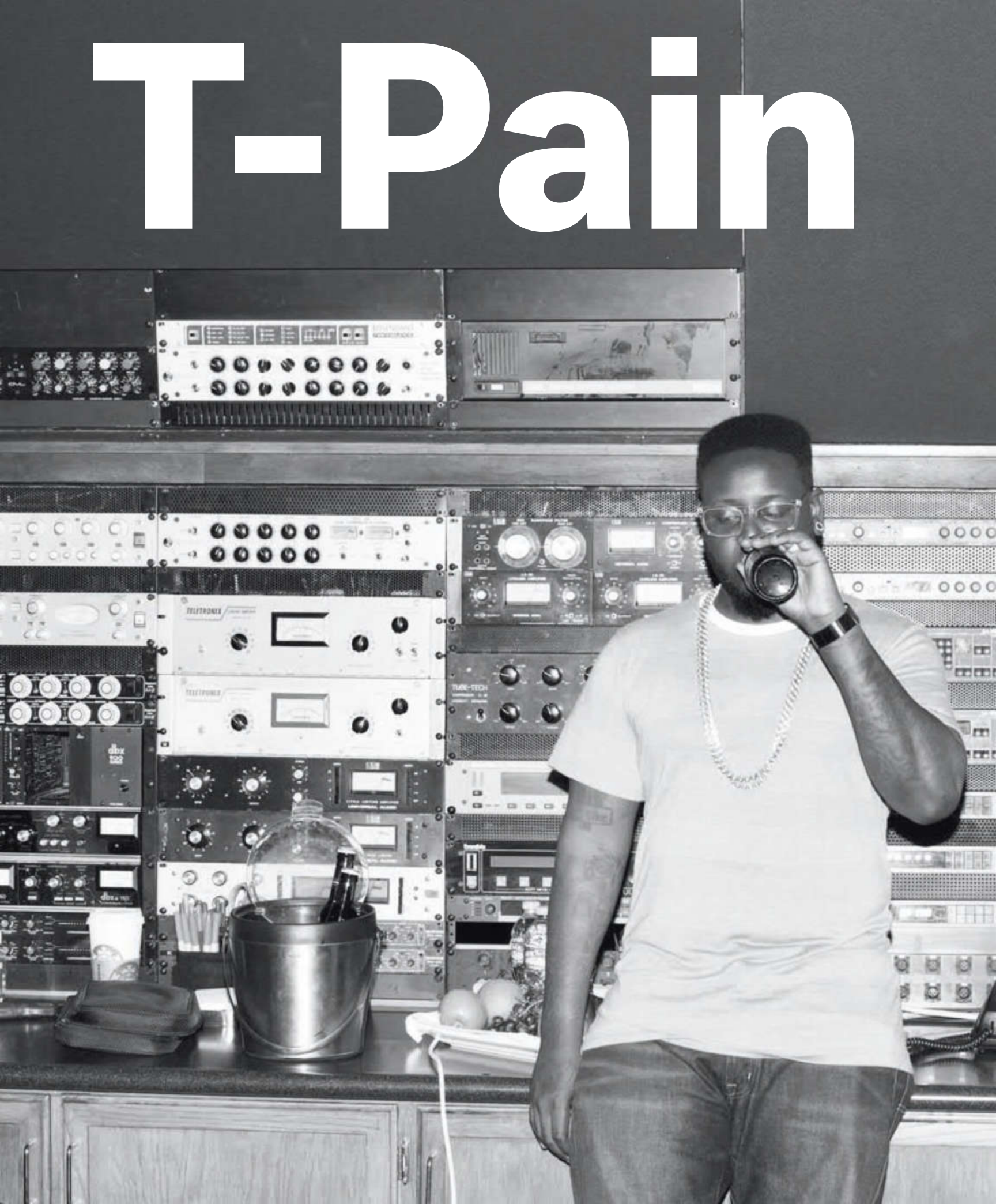
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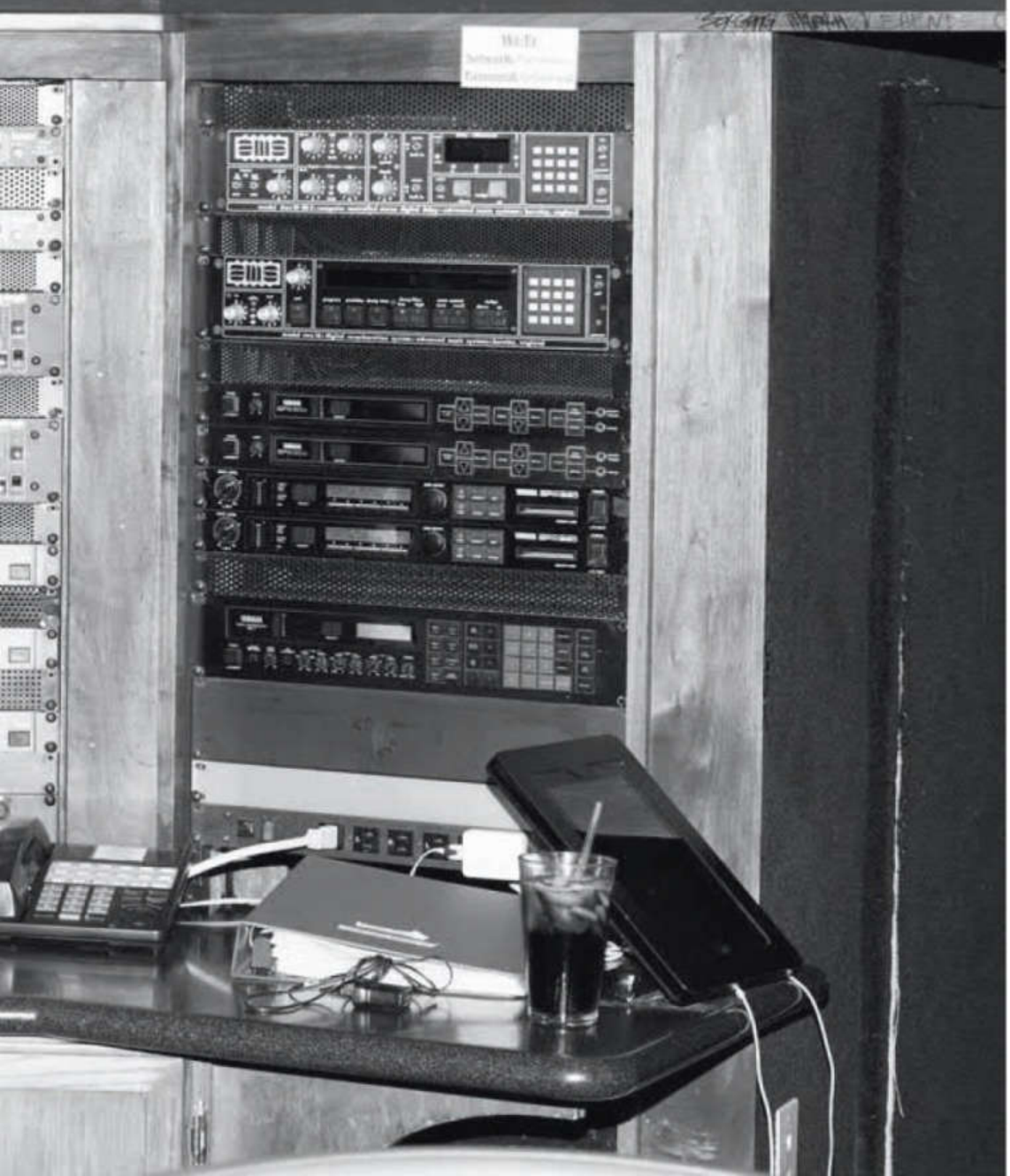
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T-Pain



The man who made Auto-Tune ubiquitous gets raw

Story by Jeff Weiss
Photography by John Francis Peters



T-Pain's room at the W Hotel in Hollywood is stocked with premium liquor, but the bottles are all sealed. The singer and producer of "Buy U a Drank" once boasted about buying $150 shots of Louis XIII cognac (*three for you and three for me*), but these days he limits himself to beer.

With Auto-Tune now a staple of contemporary pop, country, R&B, and hip-hop, it's easy to forget the disruptive genius of early T-Pain. He was the Prometheus of the software, one of the first rappers to turn singer, and directly or indirectly responsible for everything from *808s & Heartbreak* to Lil Wayne's narco-robot warbles. A world without T-Pain is one in which Drake might still be best known as Wheelchair Jimmy, Future might never have gone to Pluto, and Cher's "Believe" might represent the high-water mark of automaton soul.

In 2011, after a string of crossover hits and two Grammy wins, T-Pain, whose given name is Faheem Najm, took a two-year hiatus. He had been one of the last superstars minted before the social media era, but as Auto-Tune proliferated he became a cheap target for parodies and jokes about the supposed superficiality of the sound, even while countless imitators leveraged his style. He was never entirely comfortable with celebrity, and his fear of failure eventually became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Suicidal thoughts plagued him. He developed a severe drinking problem, nearly got divorced, and almost abandoned music.

In 2013 he re-emerged, shorn of once-signature dreads and anxious to leave a greater legacy. Today, at 30, he retains the childlike wonder that made him a studio monster from the start, and has conquered some personal demons. But scars remain. Before our interview begins, his assistant gently makes a single request: "Can Auto-Tune be referred to as 'The T-Pain effect?'"

How do you define the different eras of your career?

I've gone through so many phases that people think I'm afraid of things. If I would have kept the circus thing going, people would have felt like, "Oh that's his shit." But since I stopped doing it so quickly, people were like, "Somebody must have told him it was lame, and he stopped doing it." I went through a steampunk phase, then stopped doing that. I didn't know if I wanted to be emo or not. It caused people to perceive a sense of insecurity, instability, or just fucking insanity. In 2005 and 2006, I thought I was a skateboarder. It didn't work out. I hurt myself once and was like, "Okay, that's it." I skated before all this extra-cool Lil Wayne and Pharrell shit. I only wore DC Shoes, super long socks. It was strange.

What about after that?

From 2007 to 2008, I thought I was the most street nigga in the world, with long T-shirts and super baggy pants. I wore bandanas under my hat but couldn't really do it with dreads. I looked very dumb.

After 2008, people started calling me a clown. The internet really went in on me for no reason. I saw "Clown," "Clown," "Clown," so I was like, you know what? I'm going to make *Thr33 Ringz*. Not only am I going to make hits, I'm going to dress like an idiot the whole time, and you're still going to love me. I'd just try to do the most outlandish shit. People would say, "Why would anybody take you seriously?" But I'm not trying to get people to take me seriously.

What did you want?

It's not about me. It's not about fans. It's not about being cool. It's not about acceptance. It isn't about wearing the new shit. It ain't about having the new shit. It ain't driving the new shit. It's about music.

I made a mark on history. Then I lost faith in everything. In 2010, I said, "Fuck it, I don't care if people like this." I didn't care if people didn't know about the album. I just lost the passion. Through 2013, I was depressed. The industry turned it from a passion into a job. I had stopped making decisions for myself. When I released "Take Your Shirt Off," and that



didn't do well, the label was like, "You were wrong this time. Now we're going to take over." That's when shit started to go downhill.

You stopped trusting your instincts?

I was so worried about being wrong that I let the label do everything because I didn't want to spend my money. Then it kept going further down, which made me more depressed. Like, "What the fuck is wrong?" Jive shut down, and they shipped everybody to RCA, which hit me off guard. I stayed making music but didn't want to release anything. I couldn't sleep because I'd hear the same song over and over.

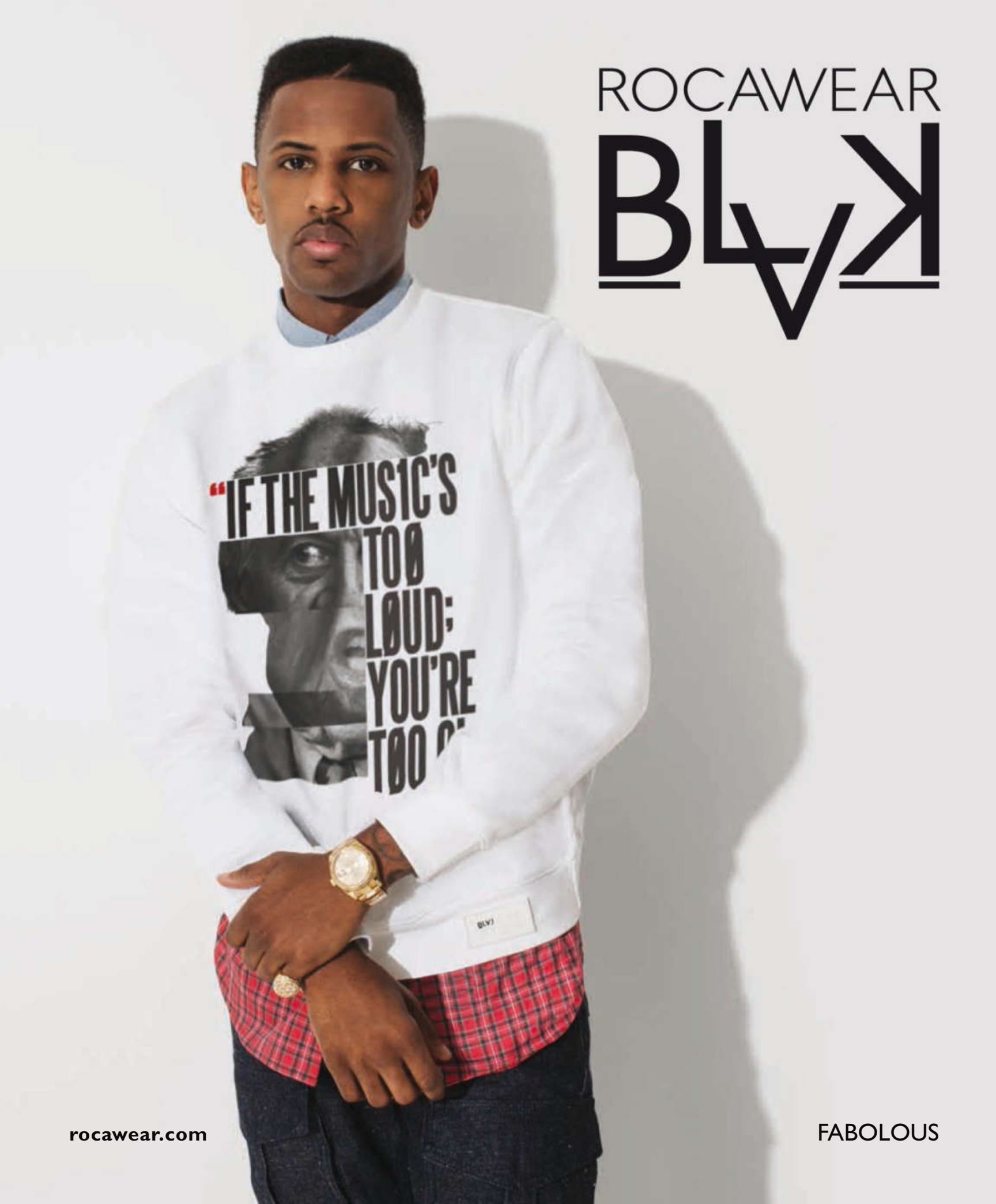
By 2013, I was like, "Let me go back and make my own decisions. Let me spend my own money to get back out there." I paid for the "Up Down" video and edited it too. It re-animated me and got me out of the depression. It showed me that I just needed to trust myself again.

What form did your depression take?

A ton of drinking. I was tearing up my house. Only since getting out of it did I find out that my wife was thinking of divorcing me. I was coming at her in weird ways. I pushed her one time, but I don't remember. I'd get so drunk that I'd just beat up my friends for no reason. I'd wake up and my fists would be bleeding. I fell down some

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stairs once. It got so bad. I had way too many guns in the house. I bought a safe just for that reason and told my wife to make up a passcode so I couldn't get in there. I'm usually a balanced person, but during that time it was all negative. I felt like I had failed.

When I found out that my kids were afraid of me, I was like, "Fuck this, I gotta do something." Once I found out it was tearing up my marriage and family, I was like, "Fuck, I didn't mean for that to happen." I had to change.

How did you overcome your depression?
My wife and I got big into meditation. We go to seminars about universal connections and stuff like that. She's actually going to come out to L.A. tomorrow, and we're going to smoke this one thing that everybody says made them see God.

Ayahuasca?
Yeah, we're about to do that. I'm kind of afraid, but we're going see what happens.

"I'm not trying to get people to take me seriously."



What have you learned that you're applying to this next phase of your career?
I don't think I've learned anything—I just matured. I'm still very dumb. I know that I don't know things, and there's much more to learn. All I know is that I came out of this situation more strategic. There are only three things I'm really afraid of in my life: bears, fire, and failing. But I'm nervous about everything. There's never a worst-case scenario in this business—it can always be way-the-fuck worse than what you think it can be. Shit can ruin not only your career but your life.

What exactly happened when you worked on *808s & Heartbreak* with Kanye? You were there to help teach him Auto-Tune?
I thought I was there to work on the album, but it was really more about him getting the approval. A lot of times, people would call me and be like, straight up, "I could do this song without you, but people wouldn't like that I'm using Auto-Tune on a song that you're not on."

You eventually find out who's texting you for a reason and who's texting because they just want to talk to you. Everybody wants those checks. Getting out of the public eye allowed me to weed out those people. The people that stuck around, like Chris Brown, Ne-Yo—those are my real friends in the industry.

Do you feel vindicated now that Auto-Tune has gone from a trend people laugh at to a permanent fixture in pop, R&B, and rap?
It's only now that I understand what being ahead of your time means. I did shit two years before it got cool, and nobody thought it was good. Then someone else comes along and does it, and now it's the best shit in the world. I think people got too comfortable with me: "You've done a lot of those smash records; it's not a surprise anymore." But now that the whole Auto-Tune aspect has gone away, it's a whole different ballgame.

What's the creative evolution been like for your new record?
There are two stages of being in the studio with T-Pain. First, there's the amazement that there's nobody else in the studio. There's no engineer. My manager will walk in every now and again just to make sure I'm making music and not on Reddit or something. I record myself. I make all the beats. It's solely T-Pain music.

The second part is just complete boredom. Because nobody knows what I'm thinking. I don't write, so it's not like there's a beat happening and I'm sitting there jotting lyrics down. I just make the beat, export, import, go in the booth, and pour my heart out.

Did you ever write down your lyrics?
I wrote until 2007. I stopped due to sheer lack of time. So many people were calling me for guest verses that I didn't have time to sit and write. One day I did 14 features without writing anything down, and everyone loved it. I was like, "So this is the way to do it." But it's a gift and a curse. The gift is I can get shit done quickly, and it's true to the heart. The curse is that I talk about the same shit a lot. I'm growing very fucking slowly. I'm still a kid in everything I do.

What are you most proud of now?
Getting out of depression. That's why it's been easy to narrow songs for my new album down to 30 from 240. Most of the songs are about suicide and drinking too much, and it's just a lot. But I kept two of them, just to show that it did happen.

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Lauryn Hill



With politics and pop culture mixing in new ways, we've never needed her more than we do now

Story by Carrie Battan

The sun has set at Afropunk, Brooklyn's annual festival celebrating black music, and the crowd is agitated. A giant banner to the right of the stage reads: "NO SEXISM. NO RACISM. NO ABLEISM. NO AGEISM. NO HOMOPHOBIA. NO FATPHOBIA. NO TRANSPHOBIA. NO HATEFULNESS." Lauryn Hill, one of the festival's marquee performers, was due onstage 45 minutes ago. When Hill performs these days, there is a looming fear that she'll show up hours late, if at all. But this is a tightly scheduled event, and Grace Jones is set to follow. When Hill finally emerges, the fact that she's only 45 minutes late—her set will be cut short, but she will play—feels like a blessing.

Clad in a floor-length white coat atop a fire-red dress, her hair cropped close to her head, Hill sits on a stool in front of her band and begins to strum an acoustic guitar. The sound system is far too quiet, and these songs—noodling renditions of songs from 2002's *MTV Unplugged No. 2.0*, her collection of raw, religious acoustic sketches—are evaporating. Most of the crowd struggles to see or hear her, and fans begin to initiate chants of protest against the crappy conditions before giving up and milling around, bored. Rumors swirl that Hill will show up at a Boiler Room DJ set later tonight, but she doesn't.

That evening in August found Hill and her fans in a familiar suspended state, trapped somewhere between anticipation, reverence, confusion, hope, and defeat. More than any icon in recent history—excluding Dave Chappelle, maybe—Hill has been shrouded in mystery and misinformation. She has produced only a handful of new tracks since her ground-shifting breakout, 1998's *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, and has faced a mountain of back taxes that landed her in prison in 2013. She has developed an inconsistent live reputation, delivering a brilliant set one month and then bailing on a show the next. Bring up Lauryn Hill in a casual conversation and you're likely to incite speculation that she is crazy, or hear references to her politics, which are often perceived as militant.

Hill has become an inscrutable kind of icon whose career begs the most dramatic questions we have about art and celebrity. What do artists owe their fans? What do those fans owe the artists? Is fame the equivalent of captivity? At what point does conviction come at the expense of creative output? Can an artist—a black female artist—participate in the entertainment industry purely on her own terms?

Hill's reputation as a tormented recluse obscures what's actually happened in recent years, which is more than meets the eye. Since 2010, she has been working quietly and diligently on a new album and a host of politically minded film projects. She began touring again five years ago as a way of exercising artistic muscle and financing her recording plans, says Phil Nicolo, one of her current producers and a founder of Ruffhouse, the Fugees' original label. According to Nicolo, she is closer than ever to finishing the follow-up to *Miseducation*. And thanks to her involvement in a documentary about the late Nina Simone—perhaps her greatest forebear—Hill is on the brink of a genuine comeback. With world politics dovetailing with pop culture in an unprecedented way, there couldn't be a better time.

Those who've been close to Hill tend to speak about her with delicate reverence, likening her to people like Bob Dylan, Mozart, or Van Gogh. Nas, a collaborator and friend, wouldn't agree to speak because he hadn't received her blessing. (Hill herself also declined an interview.) Phil Nicolo's twin brother and fellow Ruffhouse associate, Joe Nicolo, repeatedly referred to the idea of Hill's "splintered genius."

Her seclusion has been wrapped up in a deep skepticism of all media, likely tied to one incident that has irreversibly distorted her reputation: a rumor that Hill once said, "I would rather have my children starve than have white people buy my albums." Nobody has ever been able to produce a record of this quote—it seems to have originated in 1996 with a caller on *The Howard Stern Show*, and Nicolo insists it's false—but its noxious, warping power persists, and Hill has granted just a single formal interview since it began to spread.

In 2010, NPR's Zoe Chace approached Hill's management about including her in a "50 Great Voices" feature, and only after five months of back-and-forth, a Hail-Mary flight to California, and the benevolence of one handler was Chace finally able to meet Hill. What resulted was an interview about her voice and the high that creativity produces, along with an anticlimactic response to the burning question of why she stopped releasing music: "The support system I needed was not necessarily in place," Hill said. "As musicians and artists, it's important we have an environment [...] that really nurtures these gifts."

In lieu of other interviews, Hill began sharing statements on Tumblr in 2012. When she was charged with tax evasion that same year, she responded in a long post that was difficult to follow but consistent with beliefs she once professed in her music. "I left a more mainstream and public life in order to wean both myself, and my family, away from a lifestyle that required distortion and compromise for a means of attaining it," she wrote. "I did not deliberately abandon my fans, nor did I deliberately abandon any responsibilities, but I did however put my safety, health, and freedom, and the freedom, safety, and health of my family, first above all other material concerns!"

During her three-month sentence in a correctional facility in Danbury, Connecticut, Hill dug deeper into her political beliefs. She began emailing with a filmmaker named Basim Usmani, hatching a plan to create a documentary about the brutalities she'd witnessed against the women in prison. The two conducted informal calls in preparation, only to be barred from using the prison to film. Usmani walked away from the exchanges with a sense of Hill as someone with explicit activist goals: "She was very, very straight about what she wanted," he says. "She had a hands-on approach, and she really wanted to tell this story. There isn't a whole lot to justify this idea that she's an eccentric." When Hill got out of prison, she recorded the narration for a different film, *Concerning Violence*, a small but acclaimed documentary about African nationalist movements and decolonization.

Hill's activist work has mostly been ignored by fans and the press. It took a project of broader appeal to thrust her back into the spotlight. *What Happened, Miss*

PHOTOGRAPHY FILMMAGIC / GETTY IMAGES.

Simone?, a Netflix documentary directed by Liz Garbus, details the rise and fall of Nina Simone, an icon who refused to abandon her political convictions as she grew more famous. Hill is one of the reasons the project exists at all. Jayson Jackson, who produced the film and worked closely with Hill during the Fugees era and on *Miseducation*, became familiar with Simone through Hill. "I met Nina twice while working with Lauryn," he says. "It's not a stretch to say that I learned about Nina through the prism and perspective of Lauryn." Years later, when Jackson teamed up with Simone's daughter Lisa to create *What Happened?*, he worked up the courage to approach Hill about the soundtrack, expecting her to decline the offer. He would have been grateful for a single track, he says, but when the process was finished, Hill had turned in six. She also hand-selected the young R&B singer Jazmine Sullivan to contribute a song. "To see somebody you look up to and kind of model yourself after—to know that they appreciate your work is kind of surreal," Sullivan told me.

Simone was prolific throughout her career, but like Hill, chose personal and political conviction over commercial appeal during the Civil Rights era. The film documents Simone's vivid genius and the ways it tormented her—and does not spare the harsh realities of her late career, particularly during her self-imposed exile. It is impossible to watch the film without thinking of Hill. "Many times during the making of this film, when I would look at rough cuts, there were situations that very much reminded me of Lauryn, and at many times moved me to tears," says Jackson. "My hope in people seeing this film is that they understand better what it means to be an artist, and what it means to be a popular artist." Even though Hill performed at a New York screening, he's not sure she has seen the film. When invited to preview the movie, Jackson says she told him, "I'm clear on who Nina is."

Hill's renderings of Simone's work are beautiful and heartfelt, but not the original material fans have been longing for. Still, the project marks an important step in her resurrection—a victory against her own grinding gears. According to those close to her, Hill's slow, bumpy return is about fear and perfectionism above all. "It's not that she feels like, 'You can wait for me!'" says Nicolo. "She wants to be right. She wants to be perfect." He recalls times when Hill prepared herself for a show, only to go back into the dressing room at the last moment to change her entire wardrobe. "She wants to feel completely self-confident—like, 'Look, I'm great,'" he explains. But the soundtrack had a strict deadline. "Sometimes if you don't take the painting out of the artist's hand, you'll never see it," says Nicolo. "The Nina Simone experience pushed her hand in a way." Jackson says it's always been difficult to get a read on Hill's state of mind, but the fact that she's putting out work at all is a good sign. "I can say this: I know creating makes her very happy," he says. "I couldn't see her doing as much as she did [on the Simone project] in any state other than happiness."

There's a chilling moment in *Unplugged* when Lauryn Hill, in her unrehearsed rasp, begins describing the pains celebrities take to uphold the idea that their lives and their talents come easily. "[Artists are] slaving to act like, you know, 'I wake up like this,'" she says. Revisiting the song today, it feels worlds away from the pristinely packaged, mass-marketed feminist catchphrases of newer icons like Beyoncé. It forces you to consider how Hill might navigate today's music industry. For her, someone who has been outspoken about her disdain for the industry and the media, there is unlimited potential for turmoil. The clickbait economy does not treat unpredictable famous people kindly.

But in fact, Hill may be far better-suited for today's world than she was for the '90s, a time when record executives held far more power and musicians needed magazines for their stories to be told. A full-throttle Lauryn Hill comeback would also arrive at a time when social media has transformed political awareness—in the age of Twitter, we place a high value on the sort of political outspokenness she has long stood for. D'Angelo's return to the spotlight last year signaled that this generation welcomes a comeback narrative with a political underpinning, that we are capable of latching onto resistance, strength, and honesty—even imperfection. Which is to say nothing of the fact that, musically, the world is just now catching up to Hill: lest we forget, she was the first major artist to bridge singing and rapping in the mainstream.

Nicolo says new music is not so far off. Hill is in the studio with him regularly, working on new music, a process that's been unpredictable but deeply gratifying. "She has to be given the space and ability to try things," he says. "Sometimes your immediate impression is: 'You want to do *what*?' But I enjoy working with her more than every other artist." He says she's already built up enough material to release a new album, and that musically, it will harken back to *Miseducation*. Whereas the few tracks she's released in recent years feature a stream-of-consciousness that is harsh at times, Nicolo describes this work as "much more musical." It is political, but also deeply personal, he says. She is drawing "from all of her inputs."

Nicolo describes Hill's life these days as calm. Zion, the oldest of her six children, recently graduated high school. Fabolous, DJ Clue, and Jadakiss helped celebrate his 18th birthday. Nicolo says Hill devotes most of her life to being a mom: going to her son's basketball games and carting her daughter to and from preschool. She likes to venture into the city from her home in South Orange, New Jersey—"she likes the vibe of the city," says Nicolo—to take meetings.

While Nicolo has been skeptical about Hill's return in the past, today he sounds confident. "When she was first getting back into it, there were times when she wasn't as positive," he remembers. "But I think she's in the best place I've ever seen her. She seems happy and very centered. When I see her, her face lights up." When Hill performed a Nina Simone cover on *Fallon* recently, she was beaming. As a result of her prominence on the documentary, *Miseducation* recently began climbing the charts again. The soundtrack received positive reviews—a crucial reminder that her work still resonates. It's a sign that her thorny reputation hasn't obscured her art—today, in fact, it might allow us to see her more clearly.

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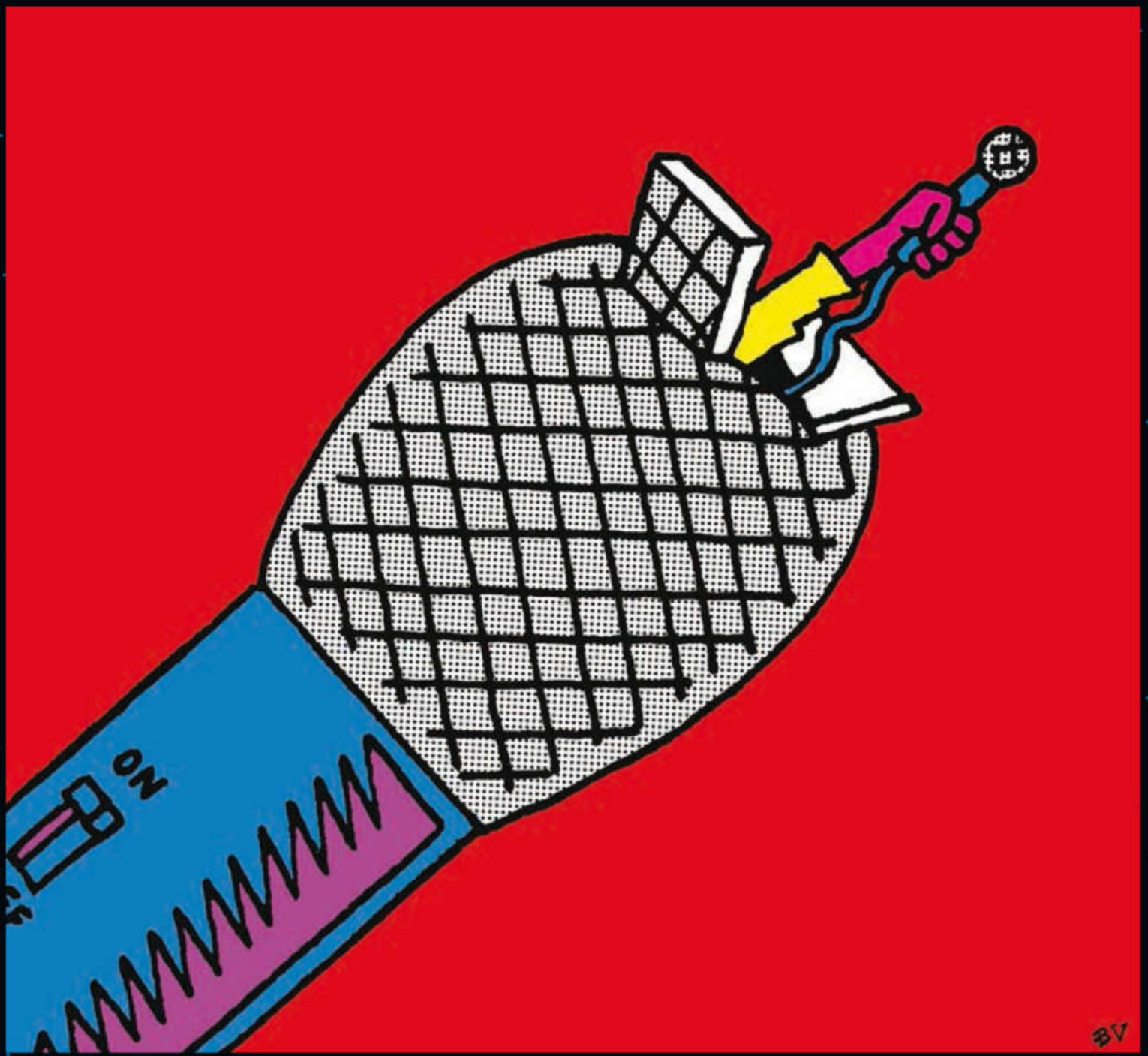
2 Going Viral

Fifteen years ago, everything was a magazine. Now, everything is a website—hopefully one designed for a phone. These 17 conversations and essays explore the ways the internet has flip-flopped high and low, pop and indie, and made everybody's lives—fans, musicians, and journalists—more confusing in the process.

FIRST AFTER THE FLOOD

There's no such thing as being first anymore, and maybe that's not such a bad thing

Story by Jon Caramanica
Illustration by Baptiste Virot



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For years—decades, centuries even—we've always wanted to be first.

Being first affirms our primacy in the pecking order of taste. It's a way to stunt on our friends and competitors. It's practically a superpower, one that separates us from them. The poetry and swagger of discovery is only for a chosen few. Everyone else? Have fun late-adopting.

Things fall apart, though. Cool became commodity, which shrunk the distance between those who know and those who would like to seem as if they do. The internet sped things up. Physical culture became emulsified: .mp3, .jpg, .gif, .mov, and more. Having a thing that someone else didn't have—or more to the point, couldn't have—became a virtually extinct mode of existence.

In 2015—in music, especially—the first has been drowned by the flood. Exclusivity has given way to ubiquity. The novelty of the new has been replaced by its omnipresence.

This shift manifests in Vine videos of suburban teenage girls hitting the Quan. It's there in the ease with which Fetty Wap has risen from obscurity to complete stranglehold on the Billboard Hot 100. It's visible in the reverse osmosis of K-pop back into American teen culture.

First culture cultivated a sense that discovery radiated from the bottom up, not the top down. It privileged grassroots movements that swelled organically. It accepted that a certain amount of time had to pass before the moment of introduction and the moment of suffusion. But friction and gravity no longer apply. Secrets are dead. First only meant something when the space between that and second was more than a micron.

What happened? Back in the mid-2000s, the internet began supplanting the role of the traditional music press in earnest. And while initially the hierarchies of online media closely mirrored those that already existed—the arc from mainstream to underground to counterculture, the siloing of genres—the ease of information flow afforded by the internet quickly rendered those structures obsolete. Superstars and underdogs move at the same speed online, often side-by-side. Instantaneity essentially killed firstness.

The industry followed suit, for lack of other options if nothing else. Music blogs moved from being specialist outlets to accepted distribution points—but a premiere of a song or video had value only for the few moments it took someone else to rip a copy and post it elsewhere. Embeddability became the default. The idea of one single outlet as a lone destination for something widely desired became not just laughable, but impossible to enforce.

Eventually, online readers took the concept of firstness into their own hands and shattered it over their knees. Nah Right, the foundational hip-hop blog, began in May 2005. Eskay, its proprietor, said that by January 2006 people were already commenting "first!"—even when they weren't.

This was a joke, of course, but a true one: if a blog post advertising a new song or video that dozens of other blogs are also featuring has a half dozen comments all screaming "first," then being first has no meaning. Maybe it's not even an actual possibility.

And if being first isn't possible, then perhaps it no longer has any real value. At minimum, its virtual elimination as a thing of value has approached the asymptotic. That means that old milestones like a first magazine cover don't mean what they once did. M.I.A., Future, Sam Smith, Animal Collective: all of them had their first cover in this magazine. And perhaps the stars of tomorrow will as well. But they will be established entities by that point, not unseen gems polished for the first time.

Nowadays, artists tell their stories in steady trickles: albums, Instagram pics, interviews, tweets. Everything is aggregated and reblogged. When something is truly viral, it's pointless for someone to claim first—once a thing is created, it belongs to the world.

Truth is, being first was only sometimes a great metric. History is kind to those who are first and right, but it's easy to overlook the many more who were first and wrong. And there's an arbitrariness to being first, which is as often a byproduct of proximity or guesswork as actual taste.

And taste is what we've always been after. People will never not want ways to set themselves apart, but what that means in an environment of total flooding will have to evolve. For some, it might mean finding a way to re-enforce scarcity, though that only solves the problem of message, not medium.

> "If being first isn't possible, then perhaps it no longer has any real value."

Mostly, taste will evolve. It will derive from being able to ascribe meaning to something that others have missed, or carving a unique path through the cultural thicket that tells a non-obvious story. It won't be just about what's acquired, or when, but about how things function and what they mean.

Anyhow, taste as we know it really only matters when there's someone to lord it over, when it functions as a klieg light and a beacon for others to follow. As everyone closes in on having access to everything, those imbalances will flatten, freeing up new jumbles, new juxtapositions, new narratives. Taste will no longer be a guide for the many—we're moving towards a post-consensus society. Instead, the impossibility of being the first will be replaced by the possibility of being the only: me, my taste, I.



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BEYONCÉ

The woman with all the answers does not answer to anyone

Story by Jia Tolentino

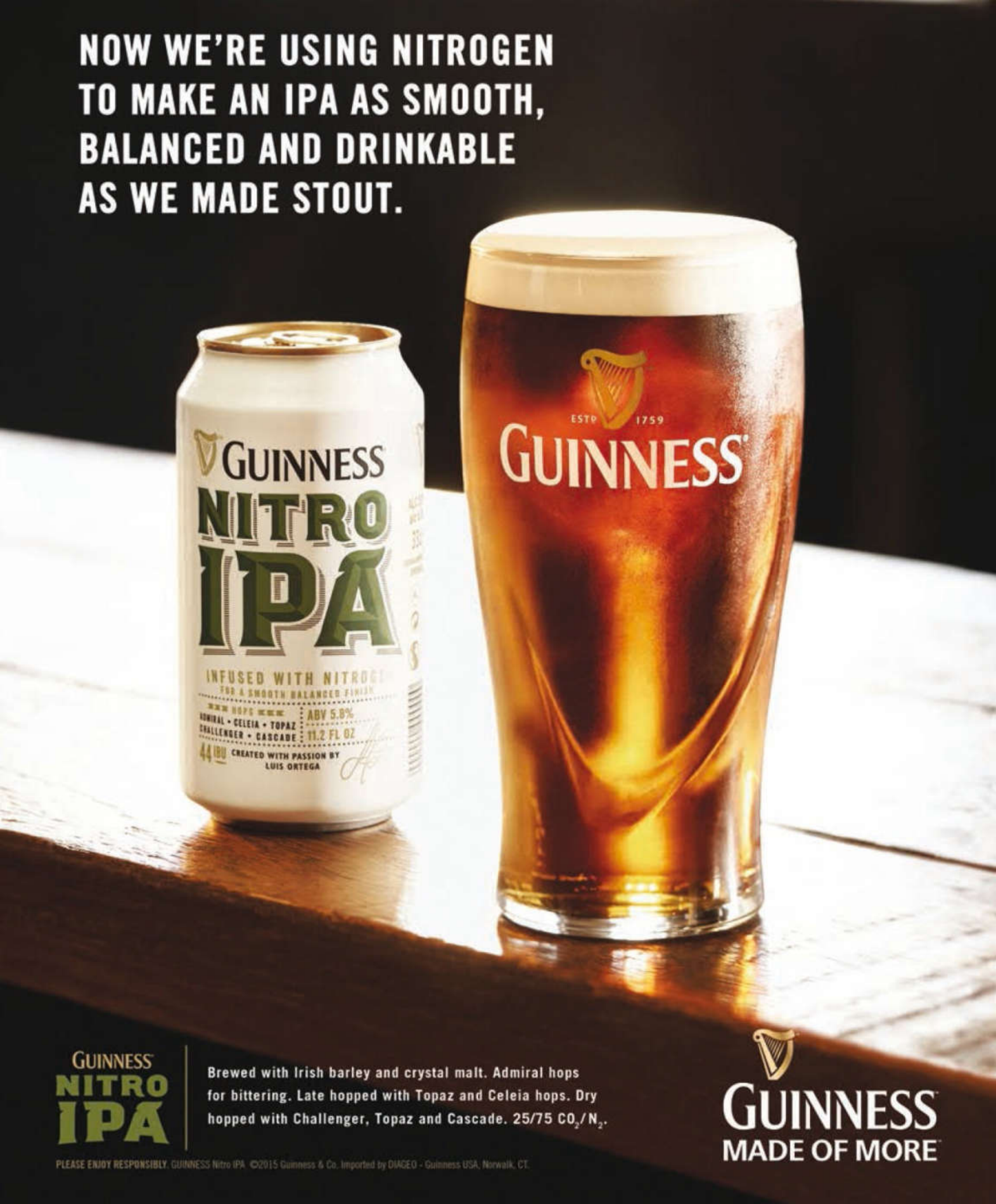
Beyoncé has achieved the American Dream. Not just the money part, although she's reportedly worth $450 million. Not just accruing property, although her newborn daughter is said to have a nursery suite in Barclays Center that costs $1 million per year. Not even just the dream about the perfect family, though her "Drunk in Love" duet with Jay Z at the 2014 Grammys revived the institution of marriage in a way unmatched until SCOTUS cast a rainbow over history this year. No: on top of all this, there's one American Dream that Beyoncé claims almost uniquely, a type of power that eludes even (and especially) the very powerful, summed up best by a sentence in a *New York Times* article from May 2015: "Beyoncé, a representative explained, has not answered any direct questions for more than a year."

Her representative meant questions from journalists, presumably. (The *Times* article was about her vegan meal delivery service; Beyoncé supposedly "dodged" phone calls for a month before finally opening her email correspondence with: "It's important you know I'm not a vegan.") For a pop star—and a female one—to not only make herself unavailable to the *New York Times* but also to insist, as she did when Amy Wallace profiled her for *GQ* in 2013, that she be the one to record her interviews with journalists, it's a remarkable refusal. While the President of the United States is going on podcasts and doing Twitter Q&As, Beyoncé has simply stopped answering questions altogether. She's a woman from whom everyone wants everything, yet she does not have to answer to anyone at all.

This is also, of course, the basic definition of a queen. And the name Queen Bey feels barely hyperbolic for Beyoncé, who is outsized and legendary not by lineage but by her own will and design. She commands her Beyhive, the most rabid fan base in existence; she inspires Illuminati jokes that don't feel entirely like jokes; she signifies such broad sexual power that bell hooks called her both "slave" and "terrorist." While black women in America are still politically erased and economically devalued to a degree that makes every exception notable, Beyoncé—rich, powerful, seemingly invulnerable, and

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nearly universally celebrated, desired, and admired—seems both to forecast a better future and to bring it closer within reach.

Through a decade where the nature of pop celebrity has shifted wildly, Beyoncé has won her position by exerting an unprecedented level of control. She dictates the means of production: there was the legendary surprise album drop, its production surely requiring a forest of NDAs. She manages her image compulsively, Instagramming constantly but only ever tweeting eight times. She will refuse to do interviews even for her own cover stories, as she did with *T* magazine in 2014. She was on this year's coveted September cover of *Vogue*, but gave no quotes; instead, the accompanying story was populated by praise from collaborators and friends. She swerves her narratives: though people still whisper that she faked her pregnant belly with Blue, she shut down rumors of a second pregnancy with a single uncaptioned photo posted to her Tumblr in which she sat on Jay Z's lap and drank a bowl-size glass of red wine. And, by releasing an extended promo reel and calling it an "HBO documentary" (2013's *Life Is But a Dream*), she made it clear that her story is not a conversation but a monologue. Willing to present herself but never explain, Beyoncé is an object lesson in the specific, underused power of sheer withholding; she's also a reminder of how long and perfectly you have to grind to even get to a place where you can give this tactic a try.

Beyoncé, after all, has spent three times as much time in the music business as the eight years that God gave her to get ready. (And when those eight years were up, they were *up*: her dad used to make her run a morning mile while singing to build up her endurance.) At 33, she's a better vocalist and dancer than anyone else working, with her phenomenal natural talent continually honed by the fact that she's such a professional—and/or perfectionist—that she watches concert footage after every show, like an athlete reviewing tape. She said, in her *GQ* profile, that she critiques herself, her outfits, her hair, her dancers, and her cameramen in her hotel room and that, in the morning after the show, everyone gets their notes.

> "This feedback loop can be somewhat terrifying."

The control Beyoncé exerts on her image and narrative is self-perpetuating. She has arranged her looks, angles, abilities, and performances so that the biggest possible crack will still be infinitesimal; she has fixed media expectations so that everyone knows that Queen Bey is going to detachedly get her way. The effect, in practice, is flawlessness, which further enlarges her legend: as she becomes even more legendary, she gains ever-increasing power to further her own control.

This feedback loop can be somewhat terrifying. As the American political machine gears up for its next presidential election, Beyoncé's self-produced, self-directed documentary seems to foreshadow a world in which we get a prepackaged narrative or nothing at all. But Beyoncé, like any contemporary politician, is careful; she's pinned her name to fundamental ideals. Who can argue with sex, money, hard work, family, and hip-hop? Who can argue with feminism when it's Beyoncé proclaiming it? After the 2014 VMAs performance that felt like the crown jewel in her PR strategy—her royal body silhouetted against the word "FEMINIST" written sky-high—she seemed far above the "is she or isn't she" identity-politics games that play out on the internet. The image was indelible, and Beyoncé didn't have to explain exactly what she meant.

It's by sticking to images, ultimately, that Beyoncé's iron-fistedness will help her last. On her Instagram account, she wordlessly conveys the personality that came out in early interviews, the shy girl with an electric undercurrent of ego. Sometimes she'll post a photo that looks doctored, like her thigh gap was carved out in Photoshop. But who would be surprised by that? It's part of Beyoncé's genius that, to some extent, she's open about the fact that her perfection is won with considerable effort. "Pretty Hurts" and "Flawless" managed a trick that, today, perhaps only Taylor Swift can replicate: using vulnerability to signal solidarity with her audience while simultaneously asserting her supremacy over all. The strategy has a good amount of duplicity baked in—pretty hurts, maybe, but it sure seems to be working for her. Still, as Swift and Beyoncé both prove, we're happy to settle for heavily crafted intimacy; replicating their strategies on our own Instagrams and iPhones, we're increasingly unable to distinguish that intimacy from any other kind.

The incident in which Beyoncé's supreme image control revealed itself to be essentially beyond public comprehension was the elevator fight—that grainy footage, appearing to show her famous sister lashing out at her famous husband as Beyoncé stood silently in the corner. Whether she was in shock or performing, there was no crack in her demeanor, even when the family exited the elevator: Beyoncé's smile was set, as it frequently is in public, to an almost chemical calm. Anyone clamoring for a different response from Beyoncé after the incident—something real, but in an ugly way for once—would get nothing; eventually, her family issued a terse and informationless three-sentence statement. Then, a few months later, Beyoncé mentioned the incident on the Nicki Minaj remix of "Flawless." *Of course sometimes shit go down when there's a billion dollars on an elevator.* Rumors about the incident were still floating—infidelity, divorce—but rumors are always floating about Beyoncé, and her non-explanations always override them. Today, no one talks about the elevator anymore. Among all the ways Beyoncé's control works for her, this is the realest: when you don't answer direct questions, you can't lie. You never have to.

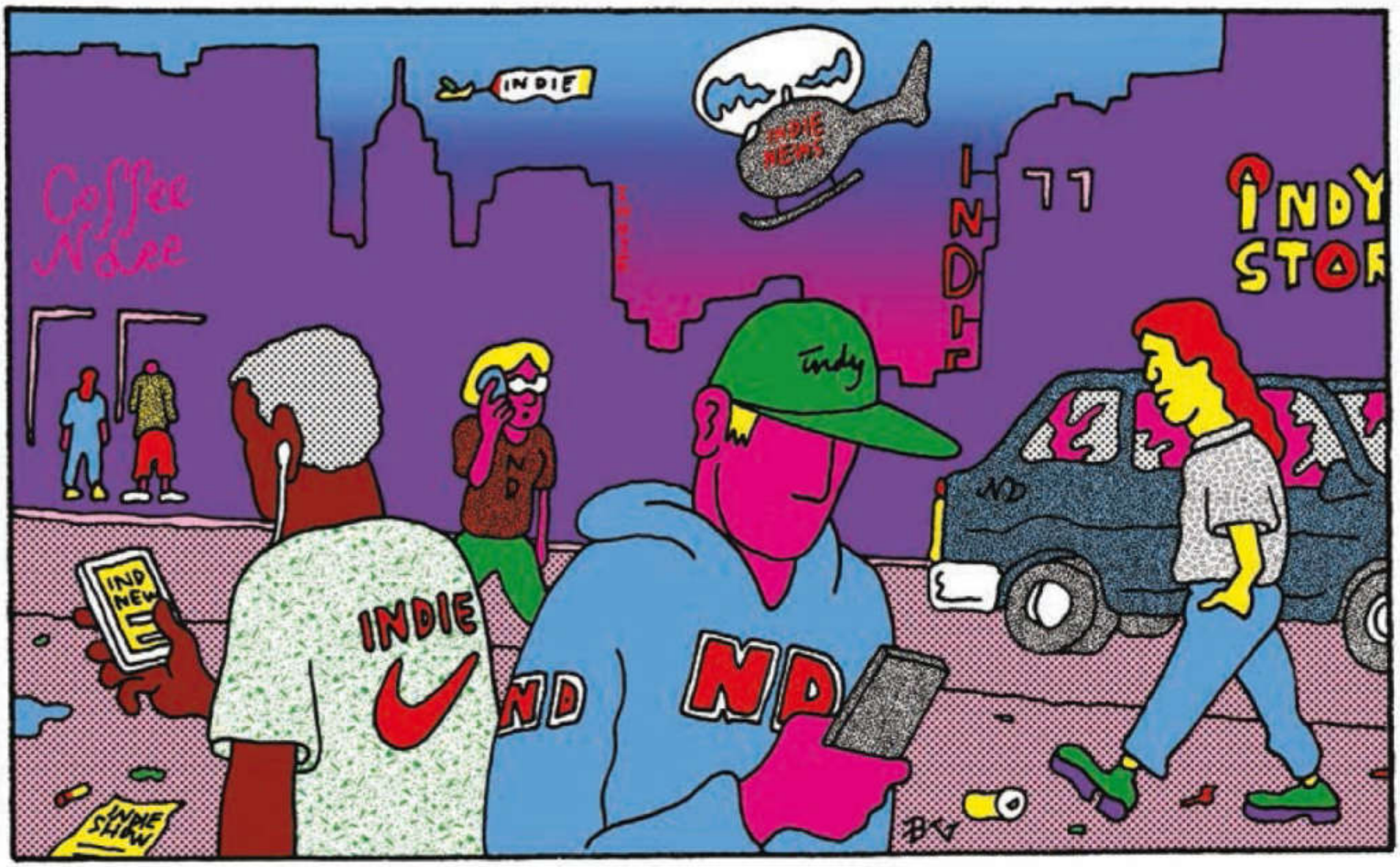


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WAS INDIE EVER RELEVANT?

Vampire Weekend's Ezra Koenig and the writer behind Hipster Runoff email each other about the state of music's long-doomed quest for authenticity

Illustration by Baptiste Virot



Ezra Koenig: Hey Carles, they want us to talk about indie. My first question is: Does it still exist?

Carles: Indie never existed. What people believe 'sounds' like indie still lives on in the fringes of Bandcamps, content farms of yesteryear, and in the hearts of regretful thirtysomethings.

Do you think this interview/deep meaningful podcast-style 'free flowing' interaction is dependent upon the #klout of your #reach?

Ezra: If I have any #reach, I shouldn't waste it propagating the lie that indie existed. How does that help me and my brand?

Carles: There is such a large audience that has no idea that indie 'meant something' that it would probably confuse them. The people 'still trying to be into indie' are into ceremonial internet album cycles of yesteryear, where they can't even tell that 'the artists themselves' are tired of projecting a 'new self' or even an 'actualizing self.'

Do you think that larger-than-life celebritydom is 'back'/a safer play now that the indie/'all access' [via the internet] phase is over?

Ezra: Carles, you keep using this word 'indie,' and I have no idea what you're talking


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about, but I will do my best to play along. As for your question, I advise everyone to pursue larger-than-life celebrity. It just feels right in 2015. The world has spoken, and it prefers genuine fakes to fake genuines. Mid-2000s indie was full of fake genuines. I won't name names.

Carles: Do you feel like failed indie blogs (like my own) created a fake/misguided tier of celebrity and global cultural relevance? Also: is there more content than ever or just more mediums of consumption?

Ezra: Most media outlets contribute to some false vision of the world, so I wouldn't pick on failed indie blogs. Yes, there is more content today. Content is the commodified form of thoughts/information, and in our hyper-capitalist era everything moves towards pure commodity. The person becomes the personal brand, and ideas become content. We all watch this process every day.

Do you feel out of sync with the times now that you create less content? Or has a wave of relief washed over you?

Carles: I am MASSIVELY relieved to not have to create eternal and perpetual content. I was fortunate to be around when the scale of the internet wasn't so vast. Tying that back to 'wtf happened to indie,' I think 'indie' was about romanticizing amateurism in music and media [via 'blogs']. But the bands that were actually successful cared about being 'masters' and never really were THAT amateur. And now we can romanticize amateurism with the false construct of the modern artisan: you can have it at your local coffee shop or 'downtown district' restaurant, places where you are served by people in chambray aprons with leather pockets.

Why must we empower people who are trying to convince us that 'a lo-fi sheen' is real? Let's face it—Selena Gomez doing a Lana Del Rey impression is really all we need to be fulfilled if you are into commodified content markets.

Ezra: The amateur/professional dichotomy is just about destroyed now. The biggest celebrities now show the openness/vulnerability/'realness' that was once associated with 'confessional' 'bedroom' indie. The smallest artists now rely on big corporate money to get started. All the old dualities are jumbled.

I don't know how 'indie' fits into this new era. I guess you're right—similar to the modern artisan, 'indie' feels like a 'false construct.' It neither leans into the dominant narrative of late-capitalist-Information-Age-celebrity nor challenges it. It's like the musical form of the hated 'moderate liberal.'

Carles: It really seems like the people/bands who embody the 'spirit of indie' from yesteryear are better off siphoning their energy towards alt-rock/soft-core rap about emotions. It is sad to see acts that 'would have caught on' in the 2k8-2k10 bubble get oppressed/fail because they are still tied to the past. Let's face it—most people aren't really open to new experiences.

Where do you go when you want to be 'authentically immersed in culture?' Remember when people thought they could get #networked together on the internet as a cultural aggregator?

Ezra: I feel most 'authentically immersed in culture' when I am sitting at an independent, artisanal cafe reading a book by a left-wing journalist with my phone flipped-over on the table in front of me.

Carles: If you were to open a post-artisan coffee shop, what would you do? What specialty drinks/roasting processes would you serve, and what customer experience would you 'curate'?

Ezra: The post-artisan cafe vibe wave we're seeing in L.A./N.Y.C./London is less old-timey shit and more Scandinavian/art gallery minimalism. My cafe would take this to its logical extreme: all-white, backless benches and one large brewed pot of coffee today (when it's done, it's done). I would play the Billboard Top 10 singles on loop all day.

Carles: It seems like the next wave might be popcorn ceilings, Ashley Furniture comfy cheap couches, and the sound of a humming fridge mic'd into speakers in a room with headachey public school fluorescent lights. Bad, palate-disrupting instant coffee, potentially 'serve yourself' out of old youth sports Gatorade jugs.

Anyway, how do you feel about being a curator of taste [via radio] [via BeatsBy-Dre iTunes or whatever]? Do you find it fulfilling to 'steal the jobs of media personalities' because your 'celebrity' + arbitrary tastes are actually interesting to real people? Or is it just part of your evolving job requirements?

Ezra: I don't know if I'm a taste curator yet. I feel more like a flavor. I wish I was a taste curator because then I could just trend-spot flavors. I'm like a lonely hazelnut frappuccino in a Starbucks in a Target. The real power is being Target.

This conversation was edited for clarity—namely, instances of "u," "ppl" and "2" were changed to be spelled out. But you can imagine.

> "The world has spoken, and it prefers genuine fakes to fake genuines."
>
> **Ezra Koenig**



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POPTIMISM

Kelefa Sanneh discusses his pivotal essay and its fallout

Story by Eric Ducker
Illustration by Other Means

In October 2004, the *New York Times* published an essay by Kelefa Sanneh titled "The Rap Against Rockism." The piece examined a strain of music criticism that held up guitar-centric, album-oriented, live-performance-friendly rock & roll (usually played by white men) as the idealized form. Then, it detailed how that ideal had been used to attack anything that didn't conform to its standards. If rockism once dominated music criticism, a much broader kind of listening and analysis was already taking root when Sanneh's piece came out, and these days most outlets (including the one you're reading) feature much deeper coverage of pop. But rockism still occasionally rears its fussy head. Here, Sanneh, now a staff writer at the *New Yorker*, discusses the original motivation of his article, the cultural climate it was created in, and a decade of changes in both music and music writing.



When people mention your essay now, they talk about the rise of poptimism, but you never used the word. People see you as a champion of poptimism, but I'm curious what you think of that concept.

When people hear "rockism: bad; poptimism: good," it's hard not to interpret that as "rock music: bad; pop music: good." Part of what I was trying to say is that rockism actually does a disservice to rock, as well as pop, by turning rock into this humorless standard bearer for all other genres. It obscures what makes the best rock music so awesome. I'm skeptical of any regime that seems to be restrictive or predictable. I ended the essay by saying, "We have lots of new music to choose from—we deserve some new prejudices too." The best you can hope for is that professional listeners

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are constantly rethinking their prejudices because there's no way to get rid of them altogether.

Do you think there's something inherent in the medium of online writing that guides people towards broadening their taste?
In 2015, where you get a certain amount of fragmentation in music, it can feel like big pop songs are the easiest things to write about because those are the things that have a broad enough audience that people actually argue over them. It's hard to know exactly how those cultural changes map onto the technological changes. In 2004, a lot of the serious critical conversation was centered around rock bands like the Strokes, the White Stripes, Radiohead, Wilco, and the burgeoning mainstream indie scene. Obviously, if you look at what monopolizes people's attention now, you see a very different group of artists.

When you wrote that piece, rap music wasn't getting the critical analysis it deserved. What is music journalism missing now?
Now, it would be easier to make that case with EDM. You have these huge producers, these huge DJs, and you should be interested in having someone who says, "How come you're not taking this EDM act seriously?" Because people always have different tastes, and their tastes are shaped by what they grew up listening to, everyone's got blind spots. Those blind spots will always change as music changes.

Were you surprised how rockist things became again after the Kanye West and Beck situation at the Grammys? A lot of articles emphasized the auteur quality of rock over hip-hop.
The Kanye vs. Beck thing became a good example of the ways in which a lot of people in America and around the world disagree with the critical consensus. A lot of people hate Kanye and think he's worthless or uninteresting, but you'd be hard-pressed to find a major critic expressing that view. That does point to one of the interesting contradictions of poptimism, which is that poptimism is partly about respecting what's popular as a way of respecting audiences and saying, "You're not crazy to love this stuff. I'm going to try to hear what you hear in it." But the Kanye situation makes me think of the reverse: critics saying to the broader public, "Oh, so you really hate Kanye. Let me listen closer and see if I can hear what you're hearing that makes you hate it."

> "If you had told me that I'd get sick of people name-checking Aaliyah, that would have been hard to imagine."
>
> **Kalefa Sanneh**

Based on some of the producers and songwriters who people like Beyoncé or Taylor Swift have chosen to work with, would you say pop stars are trying to court more underground-leaning outlets and listeners?
There may be cases where you have big acts that are really inspired by a certain subgenre or a certain artist, but I can't imagine people are sitting around in a manager's office saying, "We've got to get the readers of this blog on board." One thing that made a big impression at the time was when Jay Z and Beyoncé were at the Grizzly Bear show [on the Williamsburg Waterfront in 2009]. I don't think that would make such a big impression now. At the time it was like, "How do these worlds even coincide? This is crazy." It's fairly obvious [Jay Z and Beyoncé] weren't thinking, "We need to get all the Grizzly Bear fans." I assume it was because they were fans of the band. That kind of thing, which seemed so anomalous when it happened, now wouldn't be unusual at all. You've got every mainstream celebrity trying to go to Coachella, where aside from a couple headliners, a lot of the bands are somewhat obscure.

Is poptimism the new norm?
Lindsay Zoladz at *New York* magazine wrote a piece that talked about how that sensibility—the eclectic open-mindedness—was threatening to become the new rockism. Which is, among other things, proof that any tendency in musical taste can become super annoying. If you had told me when *Romeo Must Die* came out that I'd get sick of people name-checking Aaliyah, or even a little sick of people trying to sound like Aaliyah, that would have been hard to imagine. I wanted as much Aaliyah-ish stuff as I could get. But sure enough, even someone like her, who was really underappreciated during her lifetime, can after the fact become so ubiquitous that listeners start wanting something else.



56 PARTS. BEST AS ONE.

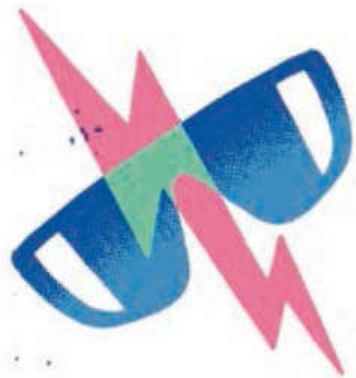
Jägermeister

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MICROGENRES

12 musical movements that meant everything, then didn't

Compiled by Patrick D. McDermott, Emilie Friedlander
Illustrations by Hisashi Okawa

Over the past 15 years, the web's vast wealth of information and shareable files has sparked novel, expressive forms, each its own rebellion against whatever else is dominating the airwaves and magazine covers of the time. But the internet has also sped up the process of hype and backlash, shortening our collective attention spans and forcing us to move on to the next thing with little ceremony. Often, it would feel like some new microgenre was over the second it got a name, if it ever really existed to begin with. But these specialized styles—including but not limited to the ones we've mapped out here—felt important when they happened. And they still do, like snapshots of a zeitgeist that's being constantly redefined.



ELECTROCLASH

SOUNDS LIKE: Deadpan, sing-spoken social commentary over clunky machine beats
PEAK YEAR: 2002
KEY ARTISTS: Chicks on Speed, Le Tigre, Peaches

"Electroclash was the first in the movement towards electro-pop music post-1980s. Very underground, very sleazy, sexually explicit, queer, and spearheaded mostly by mostly female artists. It lasted no longer than a year, really, because it was so ahead of its time." **—Peaches**



CRUNK

SOUNDS LIKE: A way-too-turnt, Southern branch of shout-along rap
PEAK YEAR: 2003
KEY ARTISTS: Lil Jon, Three 6 Mafia, Crime Mob

"The music itself seemed to be more honest back then. No one was worried about making hits, rather just making great music that people could feel. Everyone just turned up with energy and got crazy." **—Juicy J, of Three 6 Mafia**



SNAP

SOUNDS LIKE: Simple hooks, super-sparse production, and, of course, finger snaps
PEAK YEAR: 2006
KEY ARTISTS: D4L, Dem Franchize Boys, K-Rab

"It made people smile, laugh, and dance. I don't know what the hell is going on now." **—Fabo, of D4L**



BALTIMORE CLUB

SOUNDS LIKE: The same five kick patterns, the same five breakbeats, and every sample you could imagine, just more fucked-up and better
PEAK YEAR: 2007
KEY ARTISTS: Rod Lee, Scottie B., Blaqstarr

"Baltimore Club is the only dance music that gives instant motivational feelings without a lot of fluff. It's important to still have raw forms of any product available. There are still people out here in the world who appreciate genuine things, ya know?" **—Blaqstarr**



BALEARIC POP

SOUNDS LIKE: Lush, seaside disco that's equal parts happy and sad
PEAK YEAR: 2008
KEY ARTISTS: The Tough Alliance, Studio, Air France

"The world needed the feeling of it—the feeling of doing something no one asked for. The feeling of longing for something that was very far away. Not geographically speaking, duh." **—Erik Berglund, of The Tough Alliance and CEO**



SHITGAZE

SOUNDS LIKE: Heavily distorted no-fi guitar rock
PEAK YEAR: 2009
KEY ARTISTS: Psychedelic Horseshit, No Age, Wavves

"What is shitgaze? I dunno, what is the wind, or the rain, or a kiss? What is lava? It's intangible, kinda wild. It got way outta hand real fast." **—Matt Whitehurst, of Psychedelic Horseshit**



CHILLWAVE

SOUNDS LIKE: A memory of a memory
PEAK YEAR: 2009
KEY ARTISTS: Neon Indian, Washed Out, Toro y Moi

"Being called chillwave is akin to waking up one day to read in the papers that you are related to the Baldwins. You begin to be asked several questions like, 'Do you have any interesting stories from when Stephen was shooting *Biodome*?' only to respond, 'I've never met him.'" **—Alan Palomo, of Neon Indian**



WITCH HOUSE

SOUNDS LIKE: Screwed-up, melancholic, vaguely occultish machine music
PEAK YEAR: 2010
KEY ARTISTS: Salem, oOoOO, BL§§D ØUt

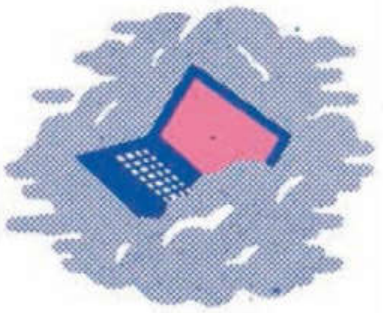
"We really don't know anything about 'witch house.' I think that's what people who were inspired by Salem started calling themselves?" **—Jack Donoghue, of Salem**



JERKIN

SOUNDS LIKE: Hyper, lo-fi raps for limber-legged teens to dance to
PEAK YEAR: 2010
KEY ARTISTS: The New Boyz, The Rej3ctz, Young Sam

"It was more than just a dance; it's a culture. It kept the community positive. It kept so many kids away from negativity. I'd rather have kids jerkin than gangbanging or stealing or whatever." **—Young Sam**



CLOUD RAP

SOUNDS LIKE: Taking NyQuil and listening to Hot 97
HEYDAY: 2011
KEY ARTISTS: Main Attrakionz, Yung Lean, Clams Casino

"Cloud rap is whatever you want it to be. A hundred people will tell you something different, probably. But me, I started from the bottom looking at the stars at night, seeing planes and shit and wishing I was on one of them." **—Mondre M.A.N., of Main Attrakionz**



VAPORWAVE

SOUNDS LIKE: IMAX sound design, waiting room Muzak, and late techno-capitalism
PEAK YEAR: 2012
KEY ARTISTS: James Ferraro, Chuck Person, New Dreams Ltd.

"This was one of the first of these musical movements to integrate a meaningful sampling of corporate/commercial aesthetics. It initiates a lot of important conversations about power and money in the industry. Or... everything just sounds good slowed down with reverb?" **—Aaron David Ross, of Gatekeeper and ADR**



DRILL

SOUNDS LIKE: Colonial military music, three centuries later
PEAK YEAR: 2012
KEY ARTISTS: Chief Keef, King Louie, Young Chop

"Me and Chief Keef are the the low-key founders of this shit. The head honchos. On some real stuff, we didn't know we were creating a sound until people started being like 'drill this' and 'drill that.' It's based off true life in the streets of Chicago, the wild wild west." **—Young Chop**

BEST COAST

Indie's first social media celeb

As told to Alex Frank
Photography by Arvida Byström



Bethany Cosentino and I were best buds and interns together at The FADER in 2008, before she quit to move home to California, start a band called Best Coast, and become famous seemingly overnight. Seven years and three albums later, she reflects on the ups and downs of sudden buzz.

Bethany Cosentino: I think people just liked me because I was myself on the internet. There was no big plan, though I do remember my manager at the time was like, "Hey, you're good at tweeting. Keep doing it." And, yeah, when I'd post a picture of my cat, it would just get so many more likes. But I still get tweets that say, "Make a personal account and stop tweeting from Best Coast about stupid shit." Well, no. I've always just said whatever I wanted.

I shot to success so fast, and I really didn't understand it. My mom was like, "You've made it when people start making fun of you." But I just didn't know how to register it. I thought, Why are these people picking on me for being myself? It made me question: do I suck? [The criticism] was always about the way I looked and my weight, as it always is for women. It fucking sucked. I was at an age when I was conflicted and confused about who I was and what I wanted to look like. I had a Best Coast blog and I wrote on it about cyberbullying, things like, "Just remember that your words hurt people." And then Hipster Runoff wrote a post making fun of me for doing that. People would say that it was satire, but it didn't matter: it hurt my feelings. You never know what someone is struggling with.

The only thing that really got to me was people talking about my relationship. Nathan [Williams, of Wavves] and I would always get weird things written about us. People would attack us as a couple. It's hard enough to be in a relationship, period, without being in the public eye. We did a full U.S. tour together. We wanted to do it because we wanted to be together, but at the same time, management was like, "They both have records coming out; they both are big bands; they date." Nathan dealt with it really well, because he had been doing it longer than me, but I didn't. He used to essentially talk me down and say, "It's not a big deal." I don't directly answer questions about our relationship—if you can't tell what's up with our relationship by what we're tweeting or what we're talking about in our songs, you can think whatever you want. I put so much of myself out there, and I'm just like, "I'm giving you enough."

Best Coast did a Microsoft commercial in 2012, and people were like, "Sell outs!" Dude, there's no such thing. We don't live in the '70s. People thought of us as punk and DIY, but what am I supposed to do? Have my band stay at this one level? This is my job. I've met people who say, "I've heard about your band because of the Microsoft commercial." There's nothing wrong with that.

We made [2015's] *California Nights* to be a lot more accessible to a larger audience, and we charted higher with it than any of our other records. Still, for now I'm happy headlining the Wiltern in L.A. I don't know if I'm even ready to play arenas and do that kind of shit. If it happens, I'll do it, but I don't think I can do this forever—I know that we all would like to do other things. I bought a fucking house, you know. That was a huge accomplishment for me.


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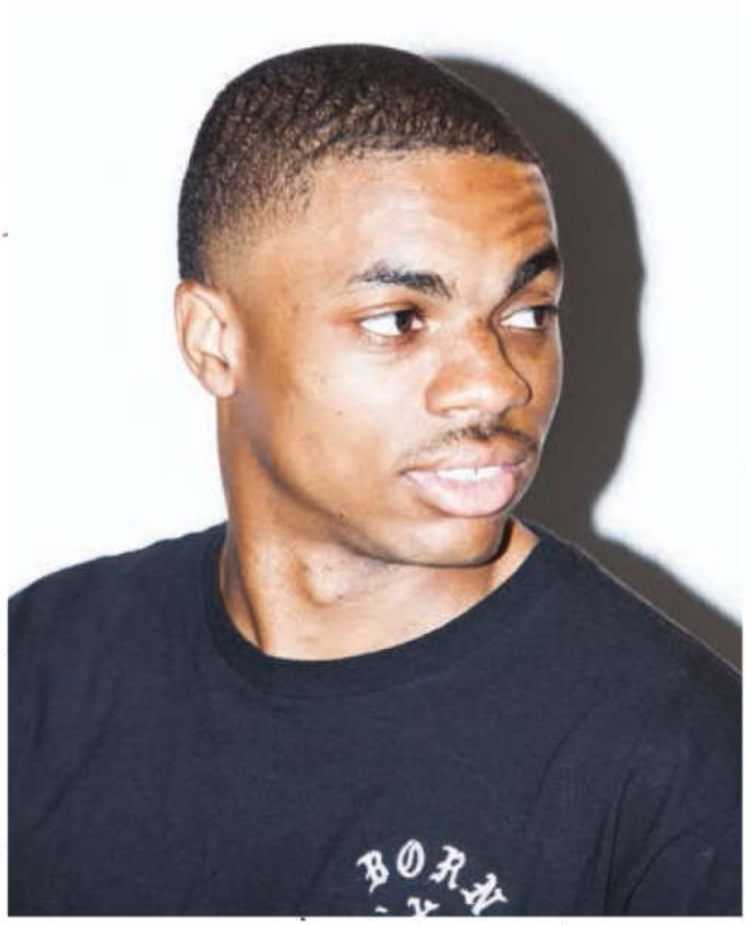
WHAT IS THE PLACE FOR WHITE RAPPERS?

Vince Staples and Mac Miller talk about rap and race

Story by Matthew Trammell
Photography by Alex Welsh

There are more white rappers today than ever, but there still aren't very many—you can rattle off a dozen if you really try. Yet somehow, white rappers have attracted a disproportionate amount of attention and accolades: from Eminem's commercial dominance in the early '00s, to frat rap exploding out of college campuses in the 2010s, to the surreal scene of the 2014 Grammys, where Macklemore won Best New Artist then apologized to Kendrick Lamar for "robbing" him. Today, the white rapper's position in hip-hop is a bit like the black citizen's position in America: both at the center and on the fringe, a group with a complicated history that keeps throwing wrenches into the status quo.

Mac Miller is a white rapper: a Pittsburgh teen turned adult icon who earned indie cred well after he gained fame. Vince Staples is not: he's a Long Beach smartmouth with a politically militant streak and a Sprite deal. We asked the two longtime rap fans and friends how and why white rappers got popular, what it's like to be one (and not be one), and whether race in rap matters in the first place.

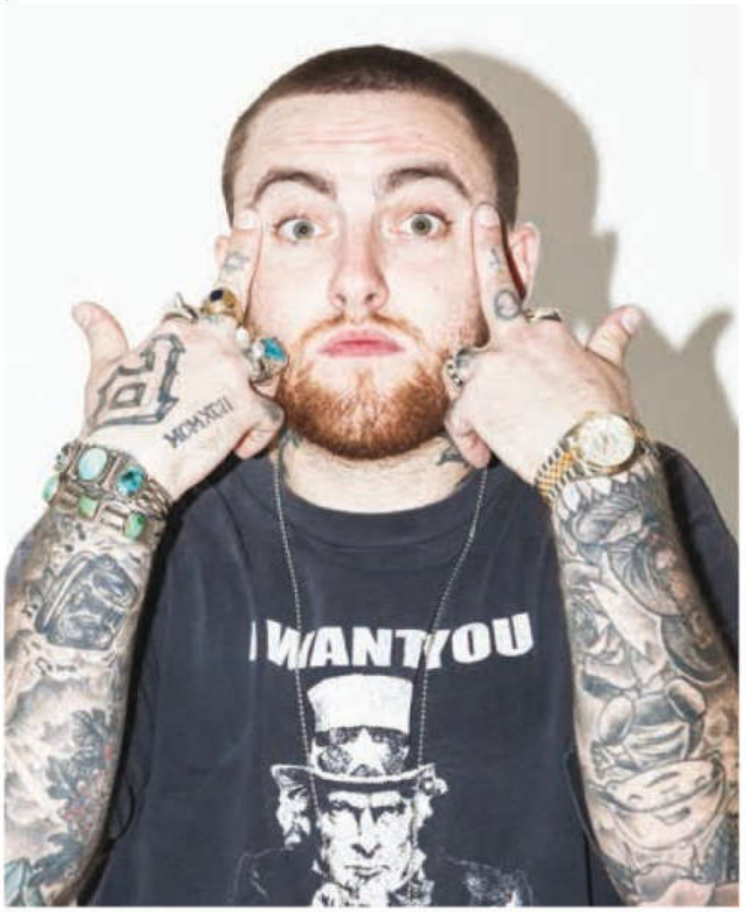


"White people definitely root for white people."

Vince Staples

“White rappers are corny. White people that rap, it’s like, ‘Oh, that’s wassup. You white, you rap.’”

Mac Miller



Mac Miller: There’s always been a bunch of white rappers in the super-underground scene—cult shit, like Atmosphere. I never listened to any of it, but there was a lot of white people like, “I love white rappers because I can identify with them.” The reason white rappers can do what they do is because white people be hoorah-ing the shit. It’s like when there are white people on an NBA team.

Vince Staples: White people definitely root for white people.

Miller: That’s a huge reason why it’s become so big right now. People are like, “Yeah! A white guy rapping! I wanna support that because not a lot of white guys rap!” I remember hearing Eminem for the first time in my kitchen: I had a really little TV that was as big as my head, and “The Real Slim Shady” was on MTV. I definitely had a moment of being a young white kid rapping every lyric in the mirror.

Staples: I ain’t really fuck with Eminem at first. I saw “Purple Pills,” and I was like, “What the fuck is these niggas doin’?” But I didn’t really care about rapping. I was trying to hear some Ja Rule, like, “Nigga, where Ashanti at? Don’t nobody wanna hear you rappin’ about your momma.” That’s how I was feeling in my younger days. Eminem was too aggressive for me.

Miller: Now it’s evolved to where you have different types of white rappers. You have a RiFF RAFF, and an Action Bronson, and me, who are all completely different. Earlier, white rappers were just on the super storytelling, very poetic.

Staples: “Lyrical miracle spiritual spherical...”

Miller: They felt like, “I can be a rapper because I can rhyme hella words and be super complex with it.” The crazy thing is, to other rappers, you’re not nice just because you can say “Abomination connotation alteration.”

Staples: When you’re white and you rap, you’ve gotta have bars. It’s all about the bars. Mac Miller said, *If you don’t love me then just lie to me*. That’s a fuckin’ bar.

Miller: Paul Wall, to the culture, is so important and crazy because he was a white dude that was just like, “I’m just a cool ass white dude, so I’mma rap.” It wasn’t, “I know I’m not supposed to be here, so let me get really next-level.”

Staples: I thought Paul Wall was Puerto Rican. Are we talking about white people that rap, or white rappers? Cause it’s

a fuckin difference. White rappers are corny. White people that rap, it's like, "Oh, that's wassup. You white, you rap."

Miller: Definitely. The genre of white rapper is not tight.

Staples: Yeah, that shit is a genre, bro.

Miller: And it's funny because, when [my 2011 album] *Blue Slide Park* happened, there was a surge of all these kids, and we were able to sell 10,000 units on iTunes just out of nowhere. I remember touring and doing shows, and I was the first rap show ever in all these colleges. Six thousand kids, and I'm the first hip-hop show because I'm white-college-friendly. That was always a demon for me. It was hard to sit here and know that, because I was a white dude, I was able to sell easier and be more marketable. That wasn't tight to me. I wanted to go through the same shit that everyone else did. But I did that shit, and that shit was huge for me. Recently, I've grown up. This is my job, and I'm going to do it. It used to be so difficult for me being a white rapper, but now, it doesn't eat at me as much.

Staples: Maybe you're not the problem. Maybe the problem is that black people don't support each other and don't fuck with each other as much as they should. Maybe Hispanic people don't fuck with each other and support each other as much as they should. You're not the problem. White people got the right idea: the first thought, the first action, is to be a supporter.

Miller: I grew up around people of all different races that were all different types of people. I know white motherfuckers that are wilder than black dudes I know, as far as some thugging shit. That's a conversation that needs to be put to bed the quickest. Regardless what the percentages and statistics are, the reality is—or, at least mine was—there was motherfuckers that were on some hood shit that were white and black. Race didn't categorize that exactly.

Staples: When it comes to giving credit and showing appreciation, that's a different conversation. If we're talking about origins of music, if you're talking about rock & roll, you have to give credit to Chuck Berry. He invented it; Elvis stole some shit; it's fine. When you talk about rap, you have to give credit to the South Bronx and that whole community and Afrika Bambaataa. You have to give credit to where it's due. If we talking about basketball, you gotta give credit to Dr. Naismith. There are people that created things, and who made things, but if we're talking about someone's ability to participate in something, then the color of a person should not be in the conversation, period.

Miller: Good and bad music, it has so much less to do with what race people are. Maybe because dude's white, the experiences life have given him, that's why his music is that bad.

Staples: Without the Beastie Boys, there's no Vince Staples music. So I don't care about some white rapper shit. My music don't sound like traditional rap music in that sense. It's not all black people where I live at; it's not all white people where I live at. Color has nothing to do with the socio-economic background. That's a different conversation. Being in a certain social situation and being of a certain kind of class has nothing to do with what color you are. They couldn't understand Kreayshawn because they never been to Oakland. Anybody that got something to say about the Kreayshawn shit, I suggest you run up on V-Nasty.

Miller: Hell no. V-Nasty is with the shits.

Staples: I want them to try Vanessa. I really do.

Miller: Vanessa: great human being, kind person, with the shits. 100 percent.

Staples: But in general, more people can connect to things in music that are said by white people because white people aren't as harsh. Not everybody can relate to being in the fucking ghetto and living on welfare and having to kill somebody and having to sell drugs. But they listen to, *I want to shop right now, I only got 30 dollars in my pocket*. It's like, you know what, I've had 30 dollars in my pocket before. "Same Love," you know what, I want people to love each other too. Rather than *Hannah Montana, Hannah Montana/ I got molly, I got white*. I know I don't have that.

Miller: Macklemore made songs about things. "Thrift Shop" is about going thrifting. "Same Love" is about sexuality or whatever. But Iggy Azalea, she's not saying anything. She's just rapping. That's not negative, she's just—it's different.

Staples: These little third grade hoes feel fancy, man. Nobody's mom in Mayberry is about to let them go to a fuckin' Migos concert. Are you serious? No. It's not going to happen. "Oh, the 'Fancy' song I like? The video's cute, go buy the shit." It's that fuckin' simple. If I made Iggy-style music—if I made polite, more easily approachable music—I would understand why kids would be there.

Miller: Name a black rapper whose subject content isn't provocative.

Staples: Will Smith. And Will Smith was hot. Lil Bow Wow. When these people were little kids? Come on bro.

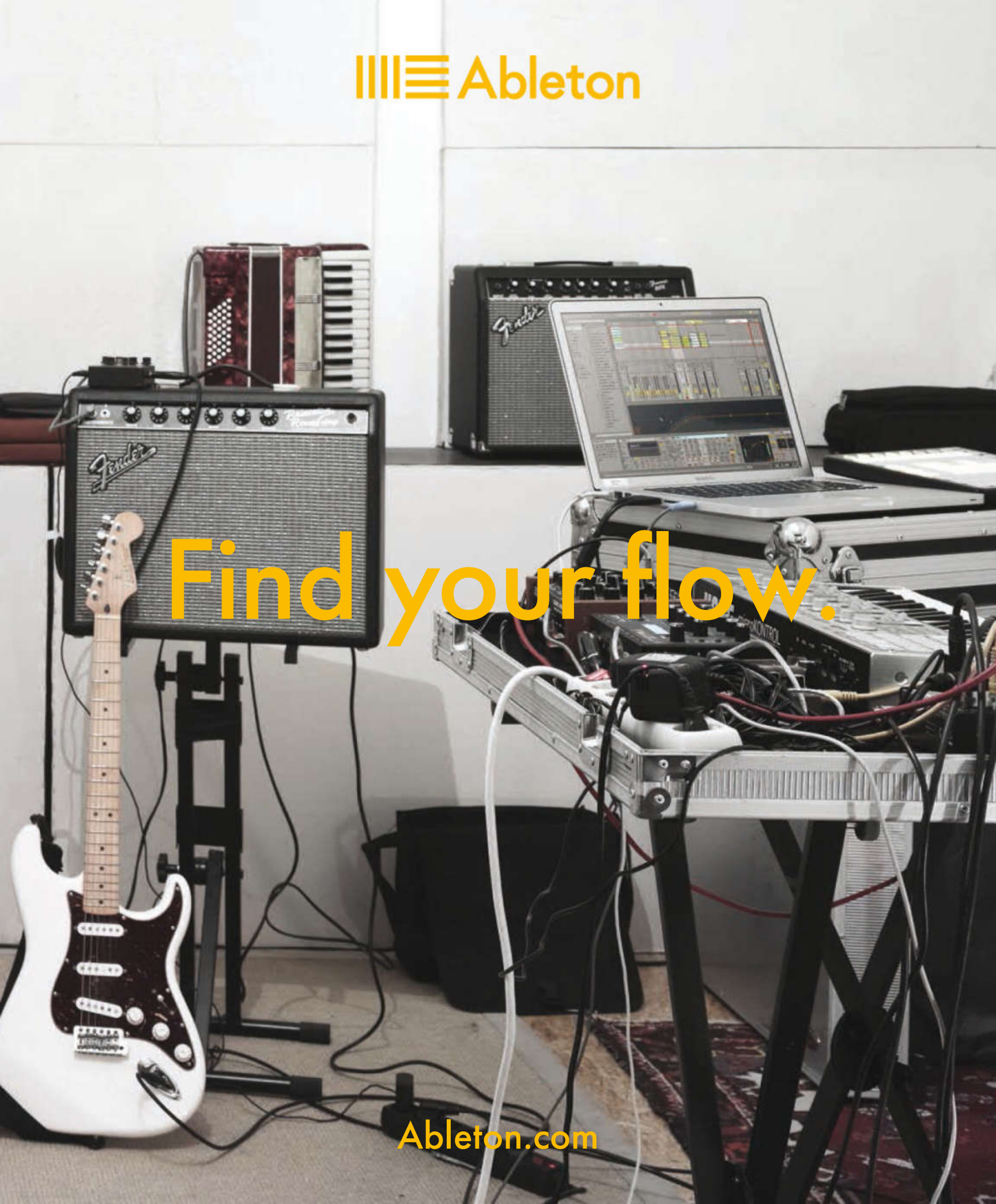
Miller: Chamillionaire has never cursed.

Staples: White people loved MC Hammer, though. "Can't Touch This." Let's dance, we're not killing nobody. White people love Michael Jackson. And they love him to this day.

Miller: I might make a song like "Thrift Shop." This is a thing that me and Vince agree on, that none of our other friends do. Me and Vince and [Schoolboy] Q.

Staples: Q, yeah. I was about to say: Q ready to get that check. I make music at the end of the day. I ain't worried about sticking to hip-hop. Y'all gotta stop worrying about the race shit. It's more important shit out there. Ja Rule got a show on MTV, let's talk about that.

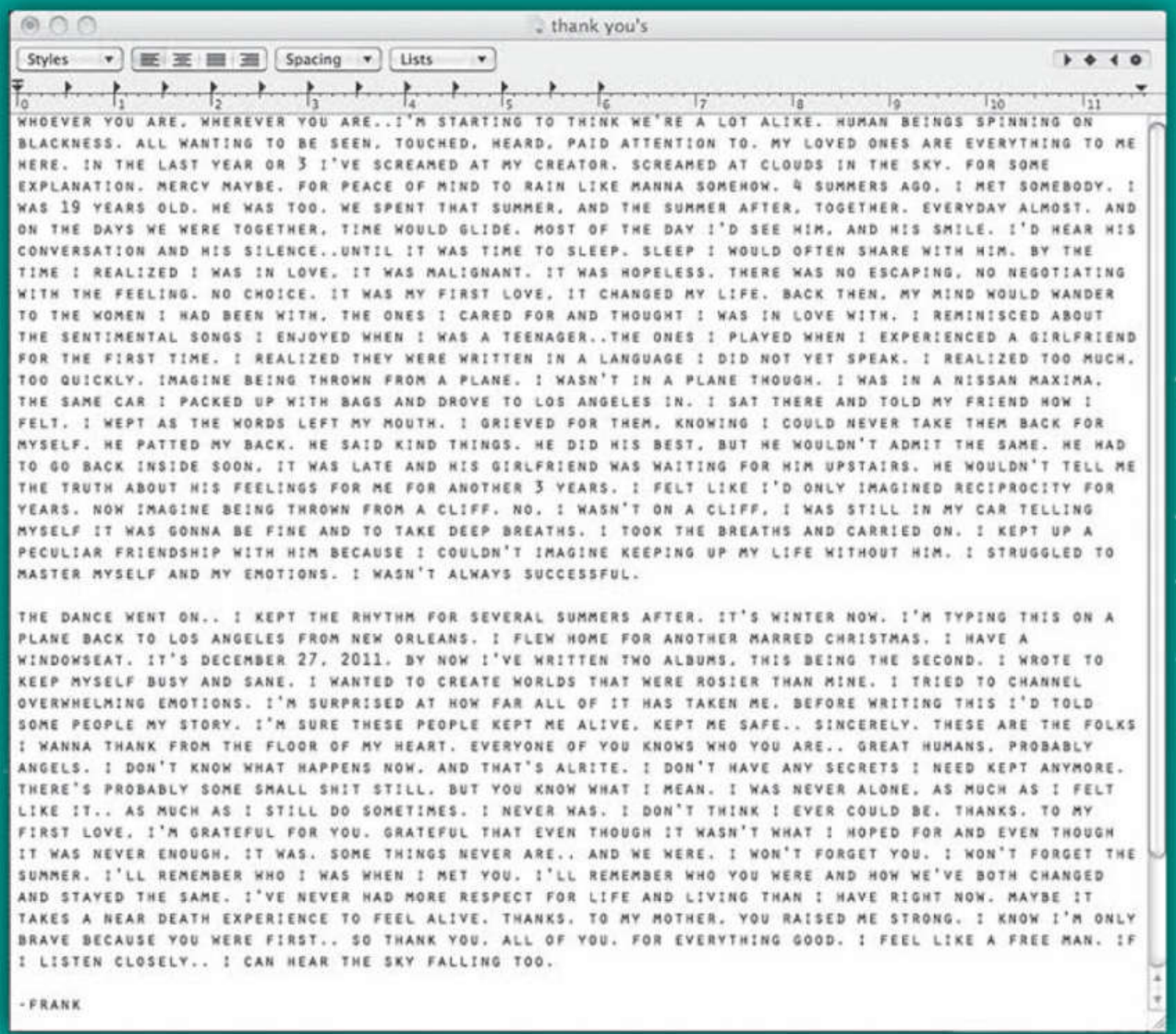
Miller: I'm on it! I got a cameo.


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Story by Alex Frank



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I was in bed with a stranger when I first saw a tweet about Frank Ocean's now infamous 2012 Tumblr post—the one in which the singer revealed that his debut album, *Channel Orange*, was, in part, about a boy. It was the middle of the night, and I turned over to check my phone. The boy I was with, who I'd picked up at a terrible gay club on the west side of Manhattan and who I never saw again, didn't know who Frank Ocean was and wasn't terribly excited by this information. So I smiled privately. This is often how life happens now: on your phone, in bed, at 2AM, excitingly alone with the glow of the screen as the world around you changes.

Most celebrities collaborate with old media for their big reveals. Ellen Degeneres, America's most famous gay person, came out on her network television show, acting out a scripted screenplay in which she told Oprah her truth. Caitlyn Jenner, America's most famous trans person, spoke with Diane Sawyer and *Vanity Fair* to explain her identity. Not Ocean. He uploaded a shitty-looking screengrab of a TextEdit file—which, judging by the free-form cadence of the writing, hadn't been edited by anyone else. He owned his story in one fell swoop, telling us exactly what he wanted and absolutely nothing more.

My own coming-out experience as a gay man unfurled in a string of sloppy conversations, tears, and stunted truths—a mess that I still have not, more than ten years later, fully cleaned up. So I suppose I envy Ocean. I'm sure that his own coming out was way more complicated than any single Tumblr post could suggest, but at least on that day in July, he ripped his fears off like a Band-Aid. "I've never had more respect for life and living than I have right now," he wrote confidently. "I feel like a free man."

After his one post, Ocean didn't talk much about his revelation. The closest we'd ever get to an inside look at his private life was an Instagram photo posted later that year of him and the beautiful male model Willy Cartier in some kind of shared yoga pose, which was interpreted as proof that the two were a couple. In truth, Ocean has never officially come out. As he said in the open letter, he's also had relationships with women. Later, he told *GQ* in a 2013 interview—the only one in which he has addressed his sexuality outright—that he's not keen to be hemmed in by sexual preferences. His phrasing, which did not commit to the strict confines of gayness, was read by some as wishy-washy cowardice, but I like to think of it as a landmark moment for anyone who has a blurrier, more fluid vision of their own identity.

> "Ocean's post symbolizes the entire potential of the internet in a single moment."

And I see evidence of his influence everywhere. It's there in Jaden and Willow Smith's self-help proselytizing and gender-bending; in Amandla Stenberg's video about the cultural appropriation of black hair, which she uploaded directly to YouTube; in DeRay Mckesson's ability to insert himself into the mainstream media by tweeting about #blacklivesmatter issues; in Kehlani's same-sex love songs. The seeds of Ocean's bohemian, enlightened aesthetic are flowering beautifully in young, woke, politically minded artists across the spectrum.

For me, Ocean's post symbolizes the entire potential of the internet in a single moment: a self-published, identity-forging, community-building piece of content. He could not have set a better precedent for regular young kids sharing their lives online—gay, straight, bi, trans, questioning, whatever. "As a writer, as a creator, I'm giving you my experiences," he told *GQ* in that same interview, sounding every bit the modern, blissful hippie. "You can't feel a box. You can't feel a label. Don't get caught up in that shit. There's so much something in life. Don't get caught up in the nothing. That shit is nothing, you know? It's nothing. Vanish the fear." And vanish it has, in countless ways in which the world feels more open. There are about 90,000 notes on that original Tumblr post, which seems so small in retrospect. No amount of reblogs or likes could count how big it has always felt.



Frank Ocean in 2012.

PHOTOGRAPHY GEORDIE WOOD.

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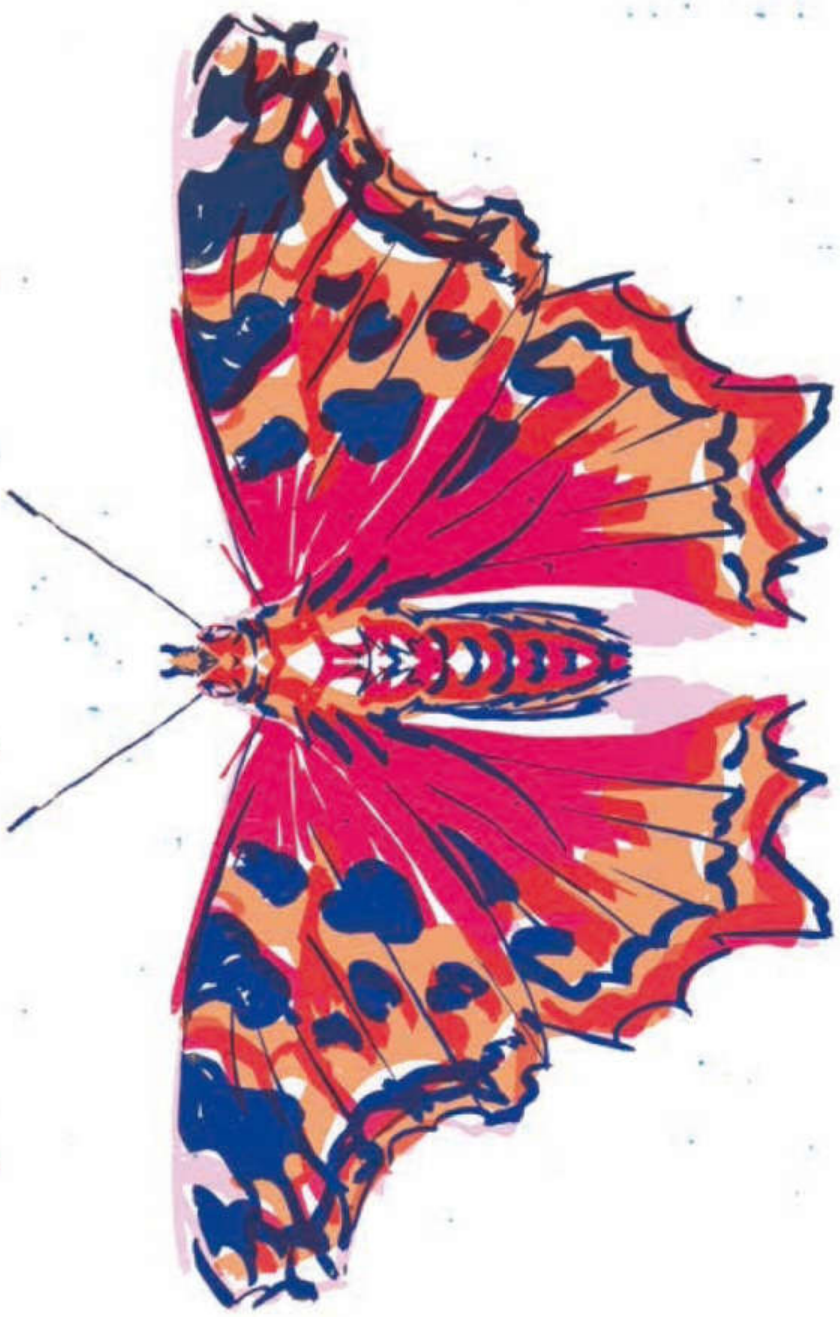
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KENDRICK LAMAR

How to talk about art when it pays to say nothing.

Story by Jay Caspian Kang
Illustration by Michael Leon

Artists can do a lot for their work by saying very little. Imaginations should be allowed to run wild because only wild imaginations can look at a painting or read a verse and see greatness, whatever that might mean. There is an inverse correlation between the complexity of a work of art and the incentive for the artist to stay mum—Kid Ink can explain everything he wants about "Main Chick" without risking too much (You see, I know this girl wants to be my main chick, so I tell her to leave the dude that she came with) but maybe Kendrick Lamar shouldn't distill the extended butterfly metaphor in his latest album or say why he decided to make the record's closing interlude, where he chats with Tupac's ghost.

Sadly enough, we've come to always expect an explanation—I can't think that a famous and talented artist could ask his audience to let his work speak for itself without risking condemnation as a diva or worse. The annotators at Genius are hungry and entitled. Art, because of the mass and arguably false democratization of opinion that has come with social media, has never had to engage with its audience as much as it does today.

Artists have also never been adored quite like this. Taylor Swift, despite her recent domination, has created a worldwide empire based on her ability to present herself in small, seemingly candid, but ultimately fatuous snippets. You see her family on Instagram at Thanksgiving, you meet her leggy friends at her concerts. An artist's popularity, in large part, relies on her ability to compress an image into social media.

So arguably there is no longer any real incentive to talk to the press. Opacity is the new norm, especially if you have enough followers. As a journalist, I'm required to think this is all terrible, but as a consumer of art, I actually find myself drawn to the new model—it allows for a secondary level of criticism in which you judge an artist for how they decide to present themselves to the internet. This analysis might not be particularly dense or insightful, but it's at least fun.

Which is all to say, before this conversation with Kendrick Lamar took place, I was told that he preferred not to talk

Today

Brian
Seen The FADER 100 yet?

Tara
I may or may not have missed my train reading it



Isaiah
I'm all like *there goes work*

Ian
It's that good?

Isaiah
Is rain wet?

Brian
Do bears 💩 in the woods?

Tara
Do you ruin parties with your music requests?



Brian
Yeah. It's that good.

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about his faith and how it informed *To Pimp a Butterfly*, his recent engagement to his high school sweetheart, or anything "political." What follows is my attempt to navigate the narrowing spaces in which a reporter can still speak to an artist about his work.

What did you listen to between finishing *good kid, m.A.A.d. city* and releasing *To Pimp a Butterfly*?
Both albums had really the same influence: a lot of gangsta rap. The only difference [with *Butterfly*] is I expanded broadly on some of my parents' earlier influences, such as Marvin Gaye, The Isley Brothers. It was a lot of oldies, a lot of funk—things they grew up on. I really just went back to my early childhood years in Compton, back to old videotapes and seeing myself in the midst of the parties. From George Clinton to The Temptations, I'm a little kid and my parents are playing these records and I'm dancing on these videos to it. Still to this day those records move me. I just took that and said, "I'ma do what I wanna do."

When the album came out, a lot of the reviews were interested in tracing those older sounds back. I think people felt that you had synthesized different types of black music, and that you were making a statement by doing so.
[That reaction] was right. This type of music from the '70s, then going into my influences from *good kid, m.A.A.d. city*, music from the '90s—it's all in the cohesive pot. I got into the jazz aspect midway into the album by listening to John Coltrane. A producer by the name of Terrace Martin gave me *A Love Supreme*.

> "I can't stop the things I want to say and do. I try not to let it overload my thought process."

Had you listened to jazz before?
I don't even think that I actually did before. I'll tell you this: the majority of the beat selections that I was picking early on in my career was all jazz-influenced, but I never knew. I just knew I loved these melodic sounds and these different notes, until somebody had to pull me to the side and say, "These are all jazz-influenced records, the sounds that you pick. This is what you like, this is what you love, this is why you like it." You know? The reason why I really gravitated toward it is because I look at myself as a jazz musician, using my voice as its own instrument. The way I cadence my words, the way I cadence my flow—all these are the same elements from the birth of jazz early on. Now I just put the music behind it.

Is there value in knowing one influence in that pot from the other, or does how something feels matter most?
It's both. You definitely want to know your roots, and why you do the things you do and why you love it. For the most part, for me, I would like to say it's been 100 percent feel from the beginning, even if I didn't know the history of it or the value of it. Knowing it's deeper than music, it's more of a soul thing.

Growing up, did you have strictly West Coast influences? How did you process the West Coast/East Coast stuff that was happening back then?
I grew up off Tha Dogg Pound and Tupac. You know the story and the legacy. That's what I was always listening to. Once Biggie came in and the whole East Coast/West Coast thing was popping off, that's when I knew about the difference between them. But other than that, all I knew was West Coast. That's the only rappers I seen, only rappers I heard, only rappers that were actually visually imaginable in my neighborhood. In today's world, I don't think it's that big of a regionalism—there's more collaborative efforts. We've seen the issues that happen when you have two coasts feuding. It messes up the music, it messes up the money, and it messes up lives. But I think the West Coast will always have its sound. The songs that you hear on the radio now is 90 percent West Coast, all coming from the Bay Area, influenced all the way down to the L.A. sound. I think we'll always have our own little niche in the game.

After the release of *Butterfly*, a lot of people were also saying that you are now occupying this role as a messiah figure in hip-hop. How do you feel about the way that people have responded to the album?
I feel great. The type of concepts that I had in the album are actually real, and one of the biggest ones is the fear of having this sort of power, or knowing your place as a role model. That's real life for me. That's a struggle every day because things that you say are now in the lives of these young kids that's listening to you. That's just something that I still face. I'm starting to be more receptive to it.

Does that struggle ever invade your writing? Do you ever start talking, then feel like you shouldn't be discussing something, or talking about a certain incident, because you know that so many people are listening?
Well, it used to. But now I'm in a space where it's all about how I convey the message. I can't stop my thoughts. I can't stop my creative process and the things I want to say and do. I try not to let it overload my thought process. But at the end of the day, I have to express myself.

Ice Cube used to say things like, "Do I look like a role model?" Why do you have a different reaction to the idea of being a role model than guys like NWA did early on in their careers?
Shit, because I looked at how I used to look at them. I thought about that. When I looked at Dr. Dre, when I looked at Snoop Dogg. Whether they said it or not, to me, they were role models. Looking at them on TV and them coming from the same neighborhood I come from, I knew in my heart that these were the folks I wanted to be like. So I take that same consideration, in the space I'm in right now.


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AMANDLA STENBERG

A teen actress and emerging cultural critic explains the ongoing revolution of being yourself

As told to Deidre Dyer
Photography by Logan White

Amandla Stenberg: I have a hoodie that says "Black Girls Are Magic" on it. At first, I was really shy to wear it. It can be intimidating to wear a message like that publicly. Then I realized what a cool statement that is. When I think of magic, I think of power and creativity and overcoming things. I think of how artistry really is magic—black communities are able to be artistic and intellectual, achieve milestone after milestone, despite everything that they face. I see how the hoodie is a symbol of oppression and racial profiling—yet, it's also ours. Minorities can take things that have been used against them, spin them on their axes, and reclaim them as their own.

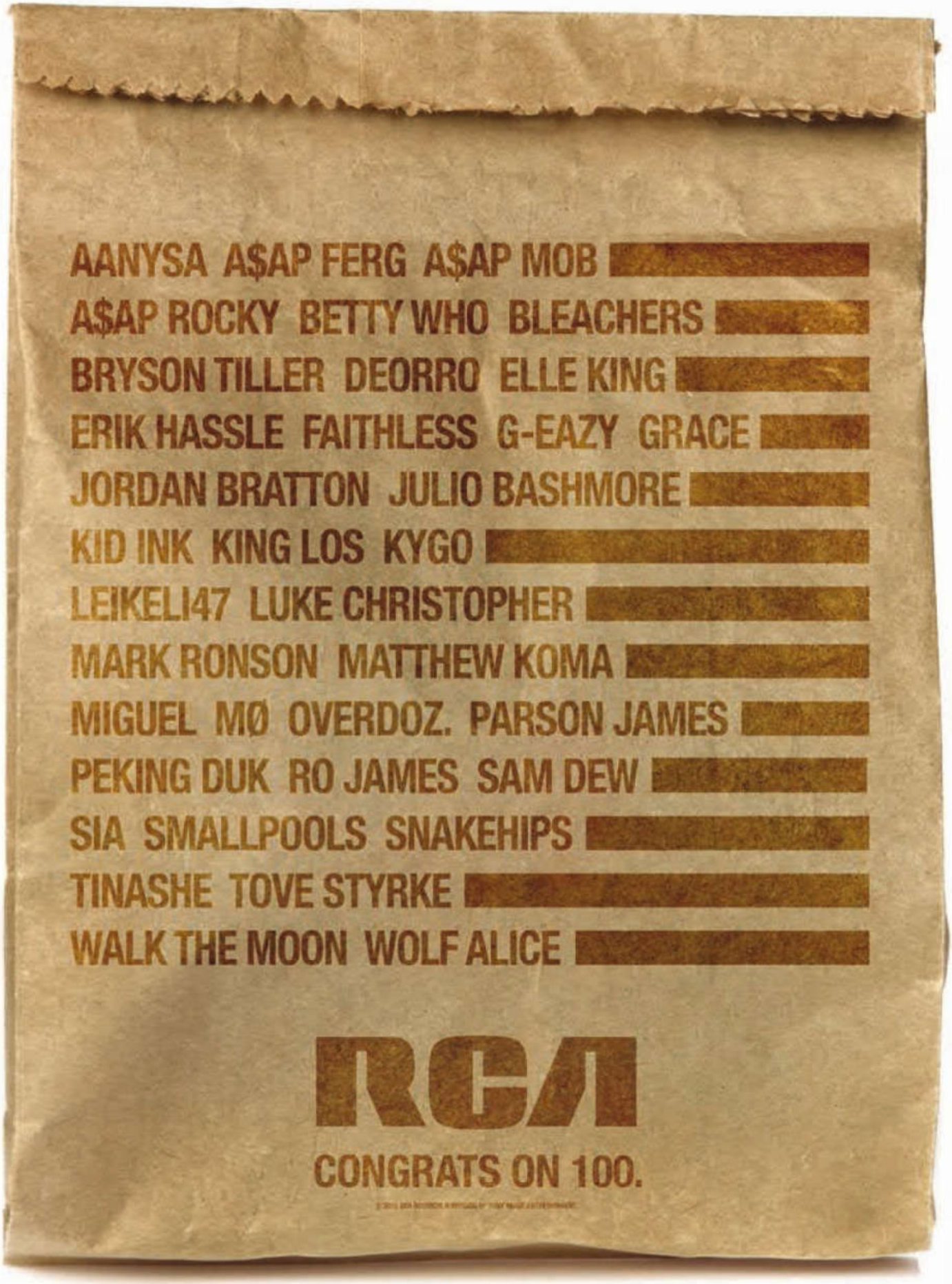
We live in a time that is so saturated by the media and so focused around celebrity culture and entertainment, so I'm very conscious of how I present myself. For a while there was a divide between the things I thought and cared about and how I expressed myself on a public level.



But culture and social media are a crucial parts of civil rights at this point. Now I see kids on social media who are expressing themselves and being artistic and posting selfies, and that feels like a revolution to me. They're showing how black kids are creative and sensitive.

Recently, I was talking to a friend, saying that people are looking up to me as a figure for social justice, someone who talks about feminism and racism. Those are things I really care about. But I told them that I feel like I haven't really done any great thing that makes me the voice of a generation, or the face of a revolution. My friend said to me that actually it's revolutionary in itself to be a young African-American person, to just be yourself. It's a tiny revolution to express yourself fully and be who you want to be, especially when systems tell you that you can't. I've realized how powerful it is for me to just discuss issues with young people and begin conversations.

There are so many awesome, powerful young black people. Something is brewing—there's this movement that's happening. Now is a time for us to connect and bond over blackness and the current day's struggle, and to create things. The racism we face today is not as blatant as in the past, but it reveals itself when black people are not able to pursue the careers they want or don't believe in themselves. I think an essential component of the war against police brutality it is just that black voices need to be uplifted and heard. I want to see more black creators. I want a place for black girls to exist within art and fashion and all components of pop culture. Black kids need to be told that they're capable of so much.


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A$AP ROCKY BETTY WHO BLEACHERS
BRYSON TILLER DEORRO ELLE KING
ERIK HASSLE FAITHLESS G-EAZY GRACE
JORDAN BRATTON JULIO BASHMORE
KID INK KING LOS KYGO
LEIKELI47 LUKE CHRISTOPHER
MARK RONSON MATTHEW KOMA
MIGUEL MØ OVERDOZ. PARSON JAMES
PEKING DUK RO JAMES SAM DEW
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TINASHE TOVE STYRKE
WALK THE MOON WOLF ALICE
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CONGRATS ON 100.

AMY WINEHOUSE

Mark Ronson talks about the quiet days before an album that changed everything

As told to Alex Frank



Amy Winehouse in 2007.

For Amy Winehouse, the *Back to Black* recording sessions were some of her final low-key moments before that album catapulted her into paparazzi hell. Working together on that now-classic, Winehouse and co-producer Mark Ronson were just two young artists casting as many magic spells as they could.

Mark Ronson: Amy was so serious about her words. Working on "Back to Black," when she first sang the chorus, she said, *We only said goodbye in words/ I died a hundred times*. My producer instinct went off and I said, "Hey, sorry, it's got to rhyme. That's weird. Can you fix that?" And she just looked at me like I was crazy, like, "Why would I fix that? That's what came out." They're some of the most unlikely lyrics you could ever imagine on a massive pop single.

Everything happened so quickly. I did a little skeleton track for "Back to Black," and she came [to the studio] the next day. She didn't really get animated about anything, ever—she just had this dead stare—so I thought what I did didn't work. And then she just looked at me and said, "I love it. That's what I want my whole album to sound like." So she stayed for another five days, just me and her.

I had to do the orchestra behind her back. I said, "Amy, The Shangri-Las, the Phil Spector shit that you love, it's the orchestra that's doing a lot of that work." She was like, "Nah, I fucking hate it. It's Disney bullshit." She didn't hear it until "Love Is a Losing Game." She had her head down on the desk, and I was kind of terrified. When the song was done, she looked up, beaming, and said, "Okay, you can leave it in." You know, the production was really a Trojan Horse. It dressed the music up to get it through the wall, but that's not why the record is what it is. It's her.

We got on so well. She would come with me to East Village Radio on Fridays to do my show, which was right after the FADER show. She would hang out for 10 minutes and get bored and then go next door to the tattoo parlor and get a tattoo. I thought maybe I should stop inviting her because I would feel guilty if she got a tattoo that she didn't really love one day.

She was overtly sexual and playful—there was never a notion that something was really going to happen, but she had to let you know that if she wanted it to, it would happen. One time, I must've fallen asleep—we had this little bench—and I woke up, and my head was in her lap, and she was just stroking my hair as if I were her little boy.

When she came for her first promo tour to New York, things were starting to build but weren't crazy yet. We went to Brooklyn so she could finally go to Daptone and meet the guys who played on the record. She's so charming; she was there sitting in the room, just laughing. I remember seeing her walk down the street on the way out, walking on top of the yellow lines. It was one of the last times I saw her carefree and anonymous. It was really a lovely day.

PHOTOGRAPHY LIZ JOHNSON-ARTUR FOR THE FADER.



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WHAT HAPPENED TO THAT BOY

25 years in the life of Birdman, rap's most confounding kingpin

Story by Jeff Rosenthal



It's hard to categorize Bryan Williams, the co-founder and undisputed ruler of Cash Money Records, where he's also signed as a rapper. (Pete Rose only coached and played for the Reds; imagine if he owned the team too.) Sometimes known as Baby, other times Birdman, he takes on many forms: a cartoonish villain who's done good; a successful businessman who doesn't pay out; a devoted father, controversial kisser, and beloved meme. Without him, there'd be no Juvenile, no Lil Wayne, no Nicki, no Drake. He and his Cash Money family have built kingdoms from nothing, outlasting hundreds of trends and thousands of artists, but the details of his business operations have long been shrouded in mystery, leading to squabbles and lawsuits that, in 2015, are threatening to unravel his legacy. Here, we trace Baby's steps to the beginning.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RYAN LOWRY FOR THE FADER; RON LAELLA, LTD. / WIREIMAGE / GETTY IMAGES.

FEBRUARY 1969
Bryan Williams is born in New Orleans, Louisiana. Raised in the Third Ward, he loses his mother, Gladys, at 7 years old and is brought up mostly by his father, an entrepreneur who owns bars, grocery stores, and a "washerette," according to an interview in *Forbes*.

MAY 1991
After spending much of the late '80s in jail for drug charges, Williams goes straight and, alongside brother Ronald "Slim" Williams and half-brother Terrance E. "Gangsta" Williams, borrows money from his father to start his own record label. They call it Cash Money Records as a nod to Nino Brown's gang in *New Jack City*.

SEPTEMBER 1992
The first song released on Cash Money, 15-year-old Kilo G's "The Sleepwalker," manages to claw onto Billboard's Hot Dance Breakouts chart. Within a year, the label's roster will expand to include a number of rappers—12-year-old B.G., Pimp Daddy, Lil Slim, and the groups PxMxWx and UNLV—as well as in-house producer Mannie Fresh. Earlier this year, Lil Slim told *Forbes*, "The first generation of Cash Money Records, people don't realize [...] would move between 40-50,000 units apiece. We had a very big fan base. The music was all over the radio, so it was being broadcast all throughout the South."



MAY 1993
Lil Slim introduces Williams to a young Dwayne Carter Jr. at Peaches, a record store in New Orleans. As recounted in a 2009 *Rolling Stone* profile, he raps for Birdman for 10 minutes, but the Cash Money impresario is most impressed that the boy looks him directly in the eye. (At the time, the rapper who would become Lil Wayne was going by Baby D or Shrimp Daddy.) Williams gives the kid a business card. Carter's mother, who had gone to school with Williams, forbids him to hang around the record label boss, but Carter continues to leave full verses on the CEO's answering machine. "I never stopped calling," he tells *Rolling Stone*.

JUNE 1993
Adopting the name B-32, for his 32 gold teeth, Williams puts out his own album, *I Need a Bag of Dope*, which should really be considered a compilation; half of the tape is just Mannie Fresh and Pimp Daddy messing around. B-32 is a short-lived nickname, only seeming to exist for this one tape. In 2012, an original pressing cassette is listed on eBay for $7,000.

SEPTEMBER 1993
Dwayne Carter Jr. signs to Cash Money as Baby D. His age at the time is a matter of some dispute. In years to come, various versions of his origin story—some spread by Wayne himself—claim he was 7, 11, 12, and 15 upon officially signing. This appears to be strategic. In 1998, the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* reports, "The baby-faced Li'l Wayne typically states his age as 15, but that's a showbiz white lie. He just turned 17; Williams wants him to keep saying he is 15, to maintain his image as the preternaturally talented youngster of the clique."

NOVEMBER 1996
Juvenile, who has already achieved regional fame with 1992's "Bounce (for the Juvenile)," is working in New Orleans as an asbestos remover. According to a 2000 story in *Vibe*, he steps off the bus one day, still wearing his flame-retardant work suit, and runs into Baby and Slim. He raps for them. They want to sign him. Juvenile asks for a salary of $2,000 a week, to which Baby responds, "Not a problem." Juvenile quits his job the next morning.

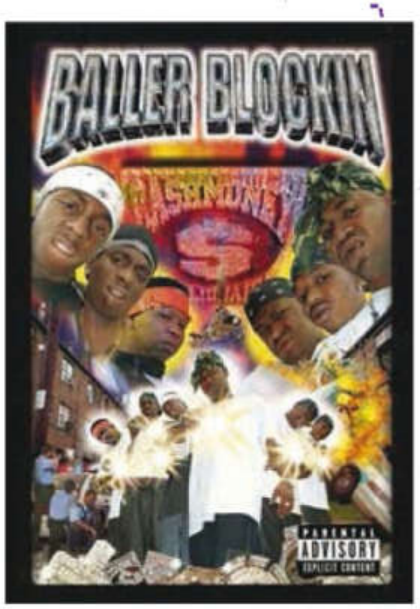
NOVEMBER 1997
Williams returns to the mic for the first time in four years as Baby, one half of the Big Tymers, a duo with Mannie Fresh, for a guest verse on B.G.'s *It's All on U Vol. 2*. According to a press release, "The fellas went into the booth and started clowning around on the mic for an intro to the album. The result sounded so good that the two decided to do a whole verse, and thus the Big Tymers were born."

JANUARY 1998
As Cash Money releases spread throughout the South, other labels start circling. *Vibe* reports that Priority Records had hoped to partner up, but Master P—whose No Limit is already an imprint there—threatened to walk if the deal went through. In 2012, Williams tells *Billboard*, "We wasn't really tripping on being with a major. I was making a million dollars a month, shipping 100,000 [of] each album—that's at $10 [each]. And I dropped three or four of them a month."

APRIL 1998
According to Ben Westhoff's book *Dirty South*, Baby and Slim sign an unprecedented deal with Universal, including "ownership of their publishing royalties and masters, a $3 million annual advance, and 80 percent of sales profits. They also got $30 million over three years to use for videos, marketing, touring and recording." Baby tells *Insomniac* magazine that other majors called, too: "Def Jam, Columbia, Tommy Boy, Jive, everybody. We were getting tired of flying to New York." In his book, *Do You!*, Russell Simmons says, "Baby got a better deal for Cash Money than any of the suits from Harvard or Howard could have gotten."

JANUARY 1999
Juvenile's *400 Degreez* goes four-times platinum, partly off of the strength of hit singles "Ha" and "Back That Azz Up," and B.G.'s "Bling Bling" earns heavy rotation on MTV's *TRL*. According to Westhoff, "To celebrate the windfall brought to the label by this and other platinum works, Baby and Slim purchased a battalion of Bentleys for everybody, souped-up with features like giant chrome rims, televisions, and blue mink carpeting." "Bling bling" enters the popular lexicon.

JANUARY 2000
Baby, Slim, and first-time filmmaker Steven Esteb produce, write, and direct *Baller Blockin'*, a straight-to-video movie set in New Orleans. It stars The Hot Boys—a group comprised of Lil Wayne, Juvenile, B.G., and Turk—as drug dealers taking a righteous



and violent stand against crooked cops; their real-life jeweler, Sol Virani, plays an FBI agent. *Vibe* says Virani also "supplied the ice, including Baby's $80,000, 40-carat diamond bracelet," while wardrobe added 150 Stafford white tees and all-white Reeboks for the crew.

MARCH 2001
Responding to claims from early Cash Money artists Lil Slim and Mr. Ivan that they hadn't been paid over the years, Williams, who now goes by Birdman, tells *XXL*, "We don't speak on family business. We run our business organized and family business we keep discreet no matter what it be. I don't owe that to nobody."

MAY 2001
Christina and Mickey—rapping siblings from Chicago—sign to Cash Money and guest on Turk's "Growing Up." Mickey brings in his producer, Kanye West, who tries to get signed to the label. As VladTV later reported, Mannie Fresh saw the talent in West, but Baby never delivered the deal.

OCTOBER 2001
Juvenile and B.G. leave Cash Money. In an interview the next year with *XXL*, B.G. will say, "Baby and Slim aren't managin' me anymore. We just decided that a couple of months ago. I wanted to see if things would be better for me with another manager who didn't own the label."

DECEMBER 2002
Mannie Fresh briefly leaves Cash Money over a financial dispute. In 2003, Big Tymers will reunite for their final album, titled *Big Money Heavyweight*.



JANUARY 2003
Williams releases a solo studio album called *Birdman*. As for the music, *Vibe*'s Jon Caramanica writes, "all the neck-snapping, homegrown production in the world can't redeem Baby, who flows like a car stuck in neutral."

FEBRUARY 2003
Lil Wayne starts his own imprint under Cash Money called Young Money Entertainment. Cash Money maintain 51% ownership of all Young Money label property, including recordings, copyrights, and intellectual properties, but Lil Wayne is made CEO of Young Money and retains 49% of the label.

AUGUST 2003
"Bling bling" is entered into the Oxford English dictionary. B.G. tells MTV, "'Bling bling' will never be forgotten. So it's like I will never be forgotten. I just wish that I'd trademarked it, so I'd never have to work again."

MARCH 2004
Williams partners with Lugz to put out his own shoe, "The Birdman." In a press release, he says, "The Birdman sneaker reflects my own personal style. And this is just the beginning. Believe that!!" He licenses the name "Birdman" from Finnish businessman Jari Kuosma, who already has a business making wingsuits for skydiving.

MARCH 2004
Juvenile returns to Cash Money for a single album, which includes his first Billboard #1, "Slow Motion," featuring Soulja Slim.

JUNE 2004
Lil Wayne's fourth album, *Tha Carter*, comes out and reaches #5 in Billboard's Hot 200, which charts albums from all genres. "Go DJ," produced by Mannie Fresh, is his first Top 40 single.

DECEMBER 2004
Jay Z tries to poach Wayne and sign him to Roc-A-Fella, but Cash Money/Universal gets aggressive. In 2014, Jay told Power 105.1's The Breakfast Club that he'd sent Birdman a note saying he and Wayne had been talking, only to receive "a letter at our office for, like, tortious interference from a lawyer." Wayne stays at Cash Money. Later, in a 2012 *Complex* interview, Juvenile will intimate that the Williams brothers "ain't giving up power of their company," and that Wayne was too scared to leave.

DECEMBER 2005
Four months after Hurricane Katrina hits his hometown of New Orleans, Lil Wayne releases *Tha Carter II*. Birdman tells *Forbes* he personally lost "20 houses, 50 cars and memories" in the disaster. The next year, he and Wayne set up shop in Miami.

APRIL 2006
Taking note of the string of artists who have left Cash Money over the years, *Vibe* asks Lil Wayne if the label is withholding money from him. He responds: "I ain't never seen anything like that. I heard about it, but I own everything. I wouldn't be able to own anything without Cash Money Records. Every time I open my mouth, I get fed—no homo."

AUGUST 2006
A photograph surfaces showing Birdman and Wayne kissing. As Westhoff writes in *Dirty South*, Birdman got on the radio with a "New Orleans disc jockey" and explained, "Before I had a child, Wayne and all of [my artists] were my children... Wayne to me is my son—my firstborn son."

OCTOBER 2006
Birdman and Lil Wayne release a joint album, *Like Father, Like Son*, with lead single "Stuntin Like My Daddy."

NOVEMBER 2007
Birdman is arrested for marijuana possession in Tennessee, but is released on $1,500 bond.

JANUARY 2008
Jet reports that Birdman is facing a lawsuit for allegedly "owing several music-publishing companies an unspecified amount of money for using copyrighted songs without permission."

JUNE 2008
Lil Wayne's *Tha Carter III* is released, selling over one million copies in its first week, the first album to do so in three years. Four platinum singles are released from the album, including "Lollipop," Wayne's first Billboard #1 and Cash Money's best-selling song yet.

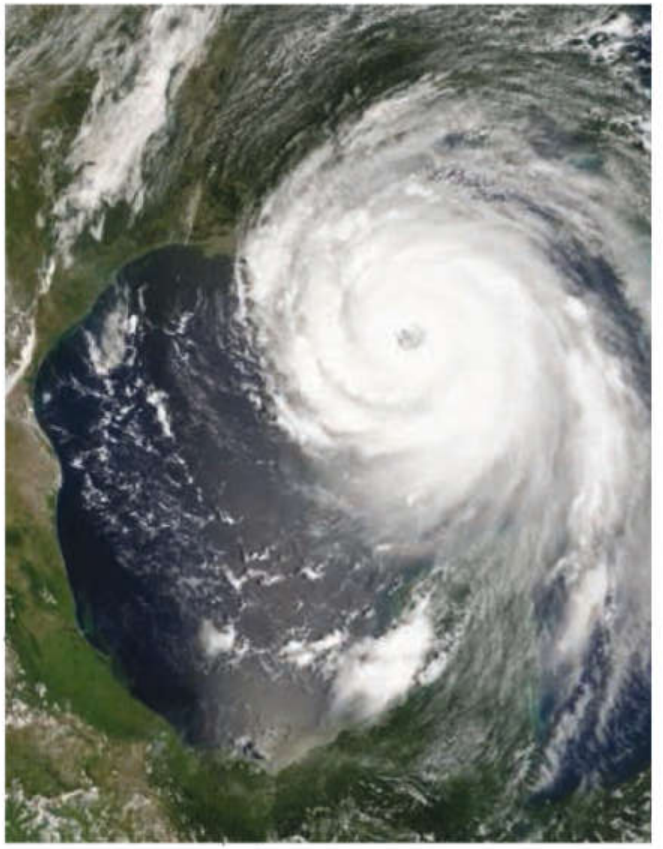
JUNE 2009
Drake signs with Young Money Entertainment. The same month, Jari Kuosma, who still owns the "Birdman" trademark, sues Cash Money for $200,000 in unpaid royalties.

AUGUST 2009
Nicki Minaj signs with Young Money Entertainment.

OCTOBER 2009
Billboard reports that Juvenile and Baby had a "sit-down" about a possible Hot Boys reunion, where Juvenile says they "settled [their] differences."

JANUARY 2010
Baby gets an oil pumpjack tattooed above his right ear. He and his brother Slim have teamed up to form Bronald Oil & Gas LLC, billed as an "oil and gas exploration company." (The company name is a mash-up of its owners' first names, Bryan and Ronald.)

FEBRUARY 2010
Bloomberg investigates and finds that Bronald



BJ The Chicago Kid



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MOTOWN

Oil & Gas LLC is a sham: "Regulators that handle oil and gas permits and operator licenses in Texas and Louisiana didn't have records of Bronald's existence; nor did Secretary of State offices in Texas and Florida." Baby disputes this in an interview with *Ozone*: "I've been in the oil business about four or five years now. I'm making good money off that... I got pumps and shit that are getting money monthly."

AUGUST 2011
Birdman lands on *Forbes*' Hip-Hop Cash Kings list with $15,000,000 made in the past year. "Excluded from previous Cash Kings annual earnings lists because we deemed him more executive than rapper, Birdman was included this year because most of his peers now have a similar job description," the magazine reports.

SEPTEMBER 2012
Billboard announces that Lil Wayne has surpassed Elvis Presley as the solo act with the most appearances on their Hot 100 singles chart, with 109.

JULY 2013
Rich Gang, a Young Money and Cash Money compilation album featuring the label's stars, is released. It includes the first single "Tapout," which features Birdman, Nicki Minaj, and Lil Wayne, amongst others.

FEBRUARY 2014
Young Thug begins telling people he's signed to Cash Money, including once in a video of him filmed walking through a club with Birdman. A few months later, BuzzFeed reports that Thug is only signed to Birdman's management company, Rich Gang, and that Thug is in fact signed with Atlantic.

APRIL 2014
Kevin Gates tells MTV he's turned down a chance to be on Cash Money, saying he wants to build his own brand.

SEPTEMBER 2014
Young Thug and Rich Homie Quan release their *Rich Gang: Tha Tour* mixtape with the help of Birdman, who provides distribution and ad-libs. Young Thug, an avowed Lil Wayne fan, starts telling the press of his plans to release a series of albums, *Carter 6* through *Carter 10*.

OCTOBER 2014
Young Thug and Lil Wayne trade shots—in Instagram posts, on songs, in album names—over the next several months. In January, Wayne and Thug host competing parties in Miami.

DECEMBER 2014
Lil Wayne tweets, "I want off this label and nothing to do with these people, but unfortunately it ain't that easy."

JANUARY 2015
Lil Wayne releases *Sorry 4 the Wait 2* mixtape. It is filled with veiled and not-so-veiled references to a rupture with Birdman and Cash Money, including direct language on the song "CoCo": *All I got is Young Money, no more Cash*.

JANUARY 2015
Lil Wayne files a $51 million lawsuit against Birdman and Cash Money to let him off the label, grant him joint copyright of all Young Money recordings, and pay up money owed for his long-delayed album *Tha Carter V*.

FEBRUARY 2015
TMZ releases a video of Birdman being supposedly turned away from a pre-Grammy party hosted by Nicki Minaj, but in a later interview with the BBC, Minaj responds to rumors by reasserting her loyalty to Birdman. "People know I love Wayne and I have loyalty towards him, but I love Baby too. I'm very close with Baby and I don't think people know that. So I'm banking on the fact that they're going to work this out like family. I mean, they've gone through things before, just like family does. I'm not even going to think that way."

MARCH 2015
Juvenile once again signs to Cash Money, telling The Breakfast Club, "We worked it out. Lawyers gon' do they thing, we gon' do our thing."

APRIL 2015
There are reports from BET that Lil Wayne has dropped his lawsuit, but according to *Rolling Stone*, who spoke with his lawyer, they are planning on re-filing in New Orleans, where Wayne originally signed his Cash Money contract.

APRIL 2015
TMZ reports two of Lil Wayne's tour buses are shot at while driving through Atlanta. Soon after, Young Thug releases *Barter 6*, having announced the name change four days before its release, after Wayne threatened a lawsuit. Thug says on



PHOTOGRAPHY RYAN LOWRY FOR THE FADER.

Instagram, "Can't name the mixtape *Carter 6* because these fuck ass niggas tryin' to sue just like some hoes. Big ol' Blood so... *Barter 6* on the fuckin' way."

MAY 2015
In an interview with NDO Radio, Young Thug says he's no longer under Baby's wing and no longer associated with Rich Gang. "Nah, I manage myself," he says. "Nobody brung me here, so nobody can take me there. I manage myself. I'm signed with Atlantic... And it's only Atlantic."

JULY 2015
Lil Wayne releases the *Free Weezy* album on Tidal against the wishes of Birdman, prompting a $50-million lawsuit, according to *Forbes*. Later, while Lil Wayne performs at Club LIV in Miami, Baby supposedly throws a glass from the balcony. Next, the Cobb County District Attorney strongly implies that Birdman was involved in a murder attempt on Lil Wayne in April; Young Thug's tour manager, PeeWee Roscoe, is alleged as the shooter. Seeking damage control, Birdman flies radio jock Angie Martinez to his New Orleans mansion, telling her these allegations are "the craziest shit I've ever heard" and saying this situation is "not that bad... Me and my son don't scream at each other." Also: "Nicki and Drake ain't going nowhere."

AUGUST 2015
Baby Instagrams a picture of himself deep in thought, standing next to a portrait of Lil Wayne. It's captioned "4Life LFLS YMCMB," referencing *Like Father, Like Son* and the brand they made together. At time of press, the lawsuit remains unresolved.

CONGRATULATIONS FADER ON YOUR 100TH ISSUE



WITH LOVE, XL RECORDINGS

The xx

These three shy teenagers came of age with the internet. Along the way, they learned when to speak up.

Story by Ruth Saxelby

From the opening seconds of their 2009 debut album, The xx hinted that they would reveal little about themselves. The wordless "Intro" set the stage for a characteristic vagueness from the London trio, yet the song's harmonized *oohs* and *ahhs* conveyed emotions from woe to wonder. Written in the twilight of longtime friends Romy Madley-Croft, Oliver Sim, and Jamie Smith's teenage years, with the help of temporary fourth member Baria Qureshi, *xx* is an album that tries hard to imagine what love might feel like, and, as such, demands focused listening: in a bedroom after dusk has fallen; on a night-bus with headphones hugging ears tight.

But *xx*'s dreaming, like its dreamers, was inexperienced, resulting in tentative sketches rather than confidently fleshed-out songs. The music was simple—just a few skeletal guitar, bass, and drum machine parts—because at the time that was all they knew how to do. By accident, instead of design, they represented a different way forth for popular music: rather than try to shout above the noise of the hyper-compressed, pounding beats dominating charts in the Lady Gaga era, they ducked down beneath it to whisper.

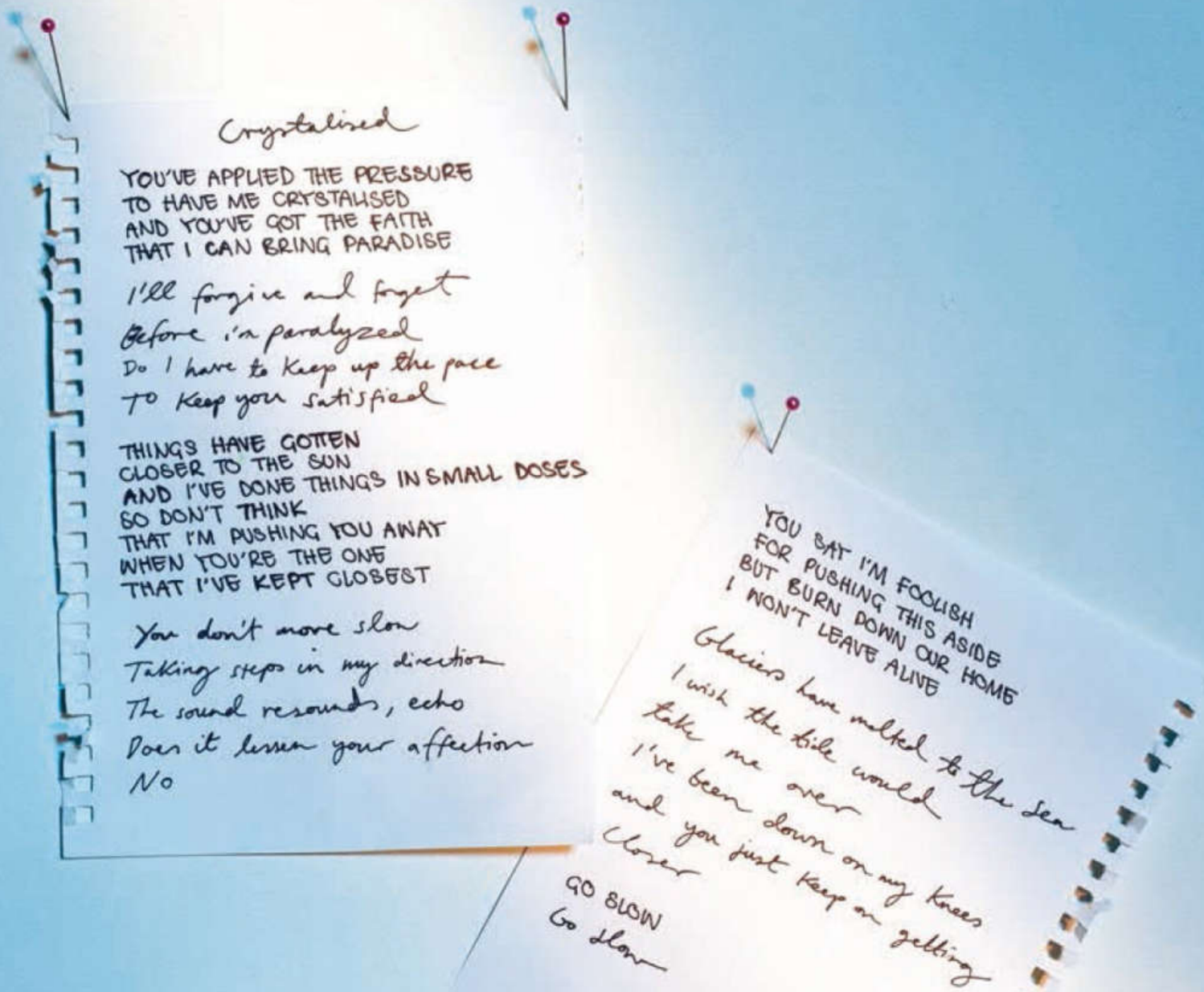
It didn't take long for the establishment to pick up the band's signals. Shakira recorded a cover of *xx* standout "Islands" for her 2010 album, *Sale el Sol*. Rihanna's 2011 song "Drunk on Love" sampled "Intro." Over the past three years, Mac Miller, Jaden Smith, Big Boi, and even Bastille have also tapped their songs for samples. What did these stars see in the moody-eyed Brits' music? "Some of them have told me they like a certain melancholy that comes with our sound," Jamie told UK newspaper *The Independent* in 2012. "And they want to find something that moves away from that overproduced American pop stuff." Kanye West said it even better: a 2014 *New Yorker* profile reported that West told The xx they reminded him of Steve Jobs, who "took something as big as the computer and put it in a cell phone." The xx took outsized youthful ambition and put it inside a sigh.

In early press photos, Romy and Oliver would often lean into one another as if about to divulge a great secret, while Jamie looked into the distance. All three wore black. They were unfailingly polite in interviews, providing just enough color for an outline yet leaving the details frustratingly obscured. Reading back over the press they've done over the past few years, a pattern emerges: in a culture obsessed with rapid-fire opinion and reaction-as-content, The xx have often resisted sharing theirs.

"We bare everything in the music," Romy told Pitchfork in 2012. "And that's why we need to let it speak for itself rather than putting ourselves out there." That same year, in an interview with *The Guardian*, Oliver protested against the press' insistence that the group's members reveal more about themselves: "I just don't want to tell everyone everything. If you took anyone off the street and asked them to share as much as we get asked to share, they'd say no. I don't think that's abnormal." In 2010, Jamie summed up their silence for *Dazed*: "I just feel... like I don't have anything to say."

The trio's reluctance to talk wasn't a marketing ploy, but the result of a real, paralyzing shyness. When they first started playing live, the band rarely looked up from their instruments, which sometimes made it difficult

PHOTOGRAPHY EMILY KEEGIN.



Here, Oliver Sim and Romy Madley-Croft look back at writing The xx's debut single, "Crystalised," alongside lyrics that they wrote out by hand.

Oliver Sim: "Crystalised" was written when we were 17. We were already gigging but only had five original songs to our name.

Romy Madley-Croft: Oliver sent me the first half of the first verse, and then I wrote the second half. It was like sort of like playing tag.

Sim: I'd heard from my mum about a process where people have their ashes compressed into crystals. As macabre as it is, I liked the idea of forcefully making something take shape into something more beautiful. The concept of the song was built off that.

Madley-Croft: Lyrically, the focus came from Oliver. He just came to me with that and I was just like, "Oh, wow."

Sim: We wrote our lyrics separately and sent them to one another over email. We were so new to songwriting, I don't think either of us had the courage to share and write face to face. We eventually came together and built the bare skeleton of the song in Romy's dad's front room.

Madley-Croft: I remember very clearly saying to Jamie we'd like a rumbling drum sound. That's quite a vague thing, but he interpreted it and came up with that rolling, rhythmic part.

Sim: The opening sound of the song is me doing my best choir boy impression, which Jamie pitched up on his MPC.

Madley-Croft: It's two very different stories happening in the song. I still don't know what that song means to Oliver, and he probably still doesn't know what it means to me—that's what I love, really.

Madley-Croft: I'm always trying to bring in things like nature and stars and the weather and connect them to a notion. Sometimes you just have to let go and say, "That's what I really love writing about." Things making sense is something I worry more about now, more that I did then. Maybe I need to stop worrying so much.

Sim: The first place we ever played this song was in front of 15 people at a venue called The Troubadour in London.

Madley-Croft: I really love this song still. The way we play it now is kind of spacious, and it leads with synths from Jamie which sort of teases the audience, and then they sing the ay-ay-ayyy bit. Quite a lot of the songs from the first album have taken on very new meaning to me because of the way the audience responds.



The xx in 2012.

for audiences to engage. Six years later, they're more confident onstage, swaggering through choreographed moves in front of giant, starry Xs. But offstage remains a different story. As their peers catalog every detail of their lives online, The xx produce little in the way of content. They rarely turn up in news feeds and almost never in gossip columns.

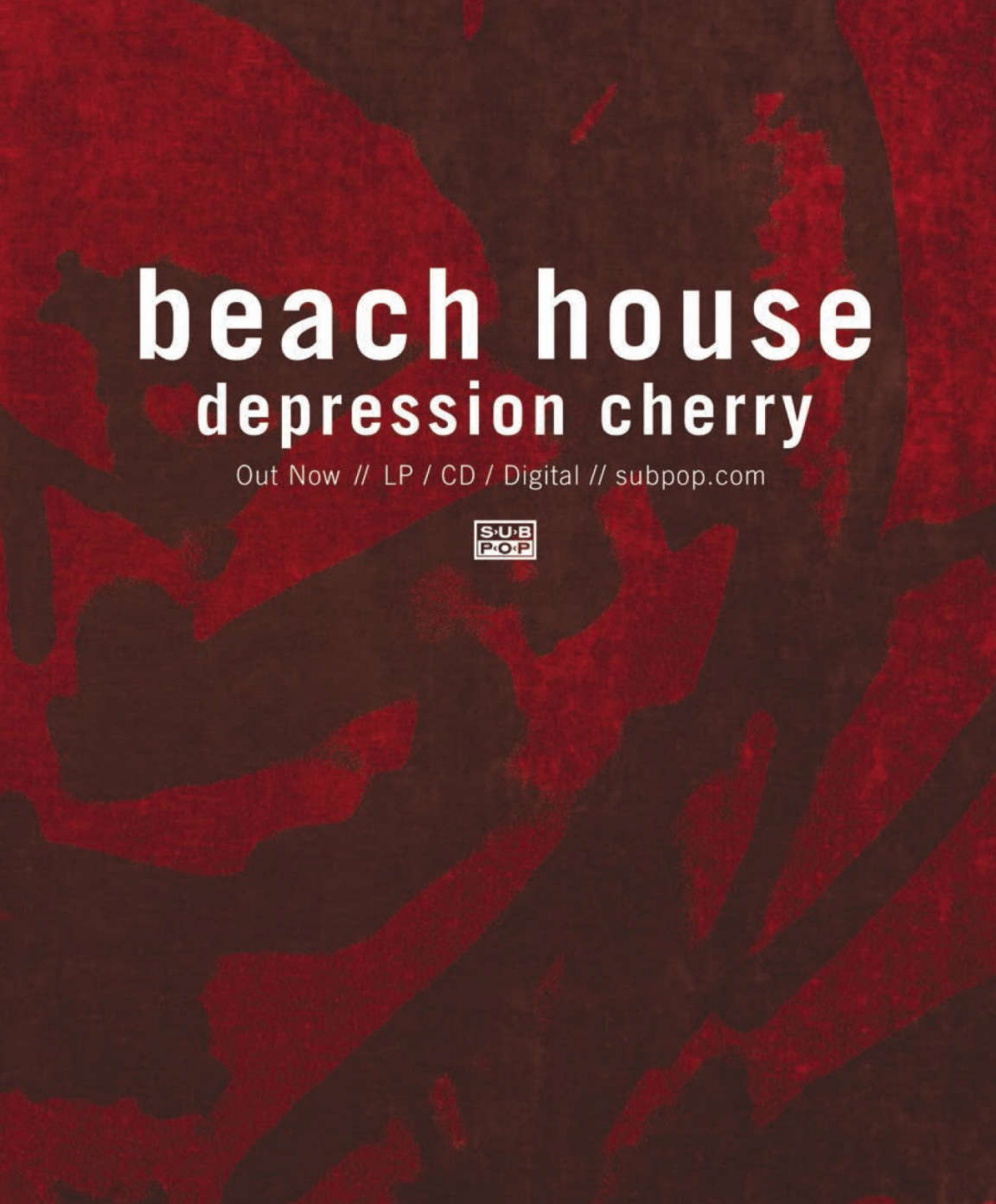
Just because they're quiet, though, doesn't mean they don't speak up when it's needed. In 2010, the band's label Young Turks tweeted that they disapproved of UK Conservative prime minister David Cameron's use of their music at a political conference. In 2013, after a Croatian anti-gay-marriage group stole their music for an ad, the band issued a press release saying they "unconditionally support the equal right to marriage regardless of sexuality." More recently, they posted an Instagram image celebrating America's landmark ruling on marriage equality.

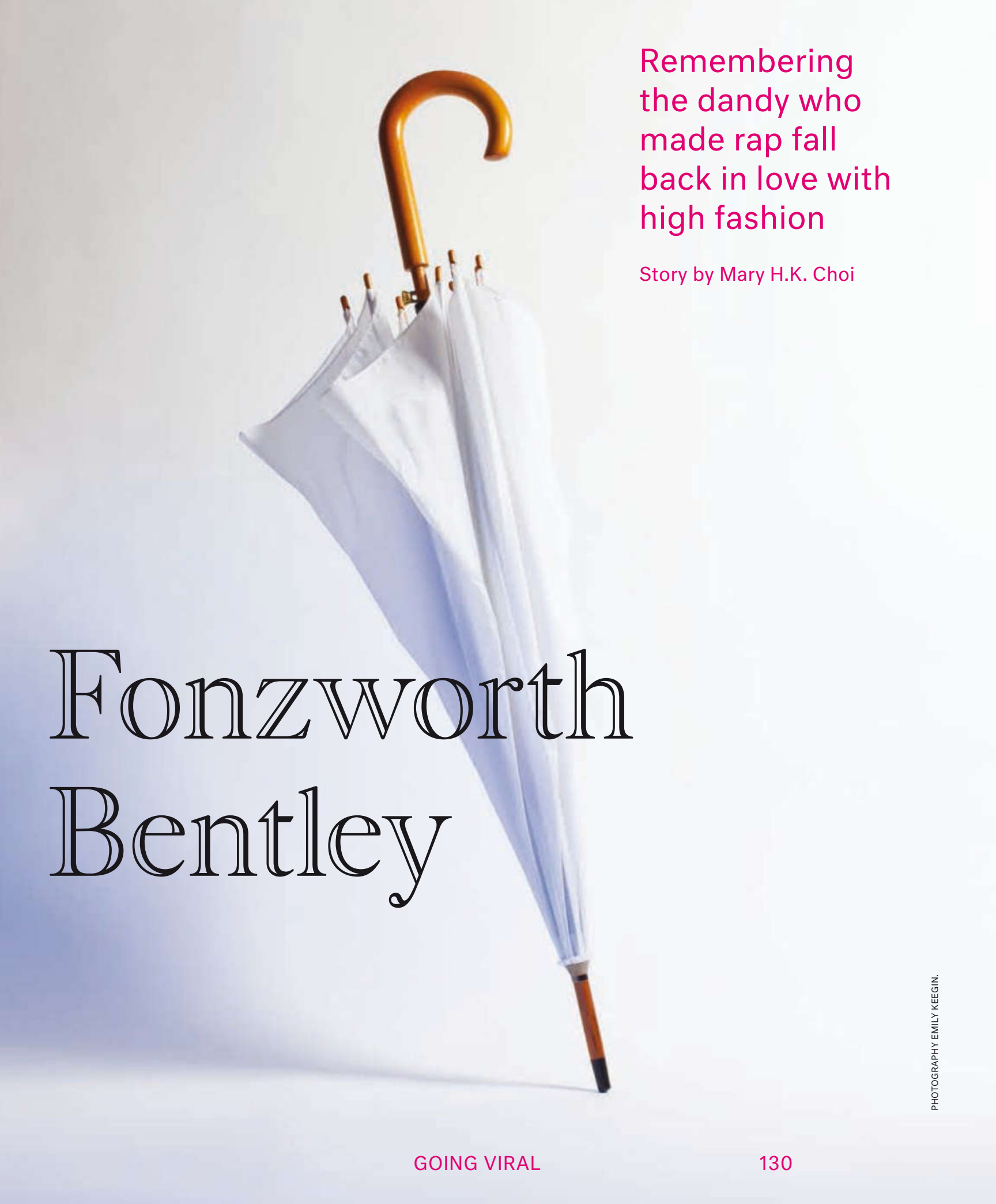
Musically, they've grown more outspoken, too. Their second album, 2012's *Coexist*, is louder, both literally and lyrically, and more geared towards the communal transports of the dancefloor, thanks to the influence of Jamie's budding career as a DJ and producer. He's always been the quietest of the three, so it's of note that his debut solo album as Jamie xx—*In Colour*, with its runaway summer hit "I Know There's Gonna Be (Good Times)"—is sonically bigger than anything The xx has put out to date. Singing on the record's "Loud Places," it's Romy who provides the biggest clue as to why: *I go to loud places to search for someone to be quiet with/ Who will take me home*.

Love, and looking for it, has always propelled The xx, and while the three friends initially charmed the world with their naivety in that regard, they're a lot older and wiser now. Choosing when to speak out and when to remain silent isn't just something that artists have to learn how to navigate in the internet age; it's something that we learn as we grow up. In an interview with The FADER this spring, Jamie hinted that the band's upcoming third album will bring to life that step into adulthood. "The first album is sort of discovering ourselves," he said.

"The xx took outsized youthful ambition and put it inside a sigh."

PHOTOGRAPHY JASON NOCITO.


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Fonzworth Bentley

Remembering the dandy who made rap fall back in love with high fashion

Story by Mary H.K. Choi

PHOTOGRAPHY EMILY KEEGIN.

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INNOVATIVE LEISURE

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In 2001, on a hot July day in St. Tropez, Sean Combs took a stroll on the beach, trailed by a dapper gentleman holding a $700 white parasol. The scene was catnip for the paps: the gleaming Combs, clad in a crisp baby blue shirt and monogrammed Gucci sandals, and the mysterious attendant behind him in a tailored ecru linen suit, managing his shade with the seriousness of a secret agent. Combs had recently changed his name from Puff Daddy to P. Diddy. He'd also just been acquitted of gun possession and bribery charges stemming from a nightclub shootout in 1999, and he seemed to be turning over a new leaf—the kind that required a fancy new sobriquet and an even fancier manservant to go with it.

Regis and Kelly wanted the story. So did *Newsweek*. The confounding pomp and the pageantry of the image begged millions of questions. Who was this man behind the man? The idea of Diddy going about his day with his full-time butler was unmistakably compelling. It was a meme before memes, a shrewdly choreographed pop culture moment. As for possible allegations as to whether the man's foppish subservience smacked of minstrelsy? Kermit sips tea in response.

That man was Derrick Wilson, but he'd become known to millions as Fonzworth Bentley. His moniker was inspired in part by Bootney Lee Farnsworth, the underdog boxer from the 1975 Sidney Poitier-directed movie *Let's Do It Again*. And much like his namesake—who was hypnotized to believe that he could win the fight—he trusted in the power of "fake it till you make it." Dressing the part was crucial.

This was the early 2000s, a time before Jay-Z (circa hyphen) had opened the 40/40 club. Puffy still had a restaurant in the Flatiron district. Rakim Mayers, a.k.a. A$AP Rocky, would have been about 13, and Jidenna, the "Classic Man" with the antebellum suits and cane, was still wearing snap-backs and Uptowns somewhere in Massachusetts. Amid all the XXL velour warm-ups and sagging jeans at the club, the Morehouse-educated Bentley turned heads with his three-piece suits, foulards tied at the neck, and hard-bottom shoes. Since he lived in Bed-Stuy and worked at the Ralph Lauren flagship on Madison Avenue, he'd go out in his natty work clothes. When his path crossed with Puff's, he hustled the Harlem mogul's two-way pager number. Styling himself as the "suit master," Bentley eventually talked his way into a job as Combs' personal assistant and valet.

But Bentley's sartorial predilections weren't just about looking pretty. Along with André 3000—a friend of his since middle school—he became one of the chief instigators behind the so-called "Gentlemen's Movement," which sought to class rap up by dressing up. They ushered in a wave of suspenders, spats, straw boaters, gingham, club collars, madras, and, perhaps most significantly, manners into mainstream, tough-guy hip-hop. It wasn't about respectability politics—a Cosby call for black people to pull up pants—it was Trojan Horse shit. A genteel, palatable comportment for getting meetings and making money. A role in the MTV reality show *Making the Band 2* followed, as well as his own show *From Gs to Gents*, and in 2007, he became a *New York Times* bestselling author for his etiquette manual, *Advance Your Swagger: How to Use Manners, Confidence, and Style to Get Ahead*.

"It wasn't about respectability politics. It was Trojan Horse shit. A genteel, palatable comportment for getting meetings and making money."

While heads were still saying "no homo," Bentley made a fastidious, exhaustive knowledge of style fashionable. When he first came on the scene, hip-hop was still mired in a mindless dedication to the same handful of European fashion houses—Gucci, Versace, Louis Vuitton—and even then mostly for the accessories. It was predictable, boring, basic. Bentley showed us the difference between Purple Label and run-of-the-mill Ralph, which occasions call for a Windsor or a half-Windsor, and how to tie the perfect, jauntily unkempt bowtie. In contemporary menswear parlance, he was sprezzy AF. A pioneer.

Now 41, Bentley's most notable and perplexing recent accomplishment is an appearance in the liner notes for Kanye West's *Yeezus*—specifically, with songwriting credits on the tracks "On Sight," "Black Skinhead," "I am a God," and "Hold My Liquor." But Bentley's been on Team Yeezy since his cameo on the "The New Workout Plan" video. And Kanye (along with 3 Stacks) did bless Bentley's foray into music with verses on his 2008 single, "Everybody."

While he may not be personally responsible for Kanye West in a woman's Celine blouse, Weezy in unisex Tripp NYC skinny jeans, A$AP Rocky in an Ann D. dress, Pharrell in Malcolm McClaren's hat, or Ian Connor's Raf Simons face tattoos, Fonzworth Bentley taught us about total commitment to a fashion moment, about being the most unrepentant swaglord when the moment calls for it, regardless of who's on the level. And it's that unwavering dedication to the dapper life that grants him his rightful place in the pantheon of the most stylish rap hangers-on. Bathrobe-dipped Cozy Boyz, eat your hearts out.



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Tame Impala

As rock culture stagnates, one of its greatest bands keeps getting bigger

Story by Sam Hockley-Smith



PHOTOGRAPHY EMILY KEEGIN.

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"*Currents* could have been one of those grandiose, confounding almost-failures. It's not a failure, though. Not even a little bit."

Fremantle is an Australian surf town about 10 miles from the city of Perth. It's where Kevin Parker, the man behind Tame Impala, is from. When I traveled there a few years ago to write a cover story on his band for this magazine, Parker was living in a foggy stasis. He'd completed 2012's *Lonerism*, the band's sophomore record, and was preparing to embark on a world tour that would cement Tame Impala's place as a legitimately massive rock band—the only one left of its kind, maybe.

Back then, I wasn't sure if Tame Impala were even going to cross over. I thought they were great, and so did a lot of other people—but why? Did they possess a certain star quality that could elevate them beyond playing second-tier stages at the same nine music festivals for eternity? I didn't realize until I was in the basement of a hotel where the Tame Impala offshoot band Pond was playing that, yes, they did. Parker, who doesn't play in that project, looked on from the audience. When the show ended there was hushed whispering in the crowd: "Is that Kevin Parker?" He looked confused, and then a little mortified. He had become a celebrity in his own town.

To be clear, Tame Impala is not actually the last rock band in the world, but it sometimes feels that way. This is partially due to their narrative: a bunch of long-haired dudes from a middle-of-nowhere beach town who went global after exploring how it feels to be completely lost inside your own head. They're not overly reverent of rock's analog past the way Jack White or The Black Keys are, and they're not trying to latch onto a semi-mythical folk world where everyone wears bad hats, like Mumford & Sons. Parker's not playing dingy lo-fi in his garage, revitalizing emo, or downplaying his talent to cultivate some sort of nostalgic slacker vibe. He is simply great at writing songs that turn the chaos of his emotions into catchy mantras. This is the guy who, on the hypnotic *Lonerism* single "Feels Like We Only Go Backwards," crafted a hit about how it sucks to get your hopes up. Eventually, that song got so big that Kendrick Lamar remixed it.

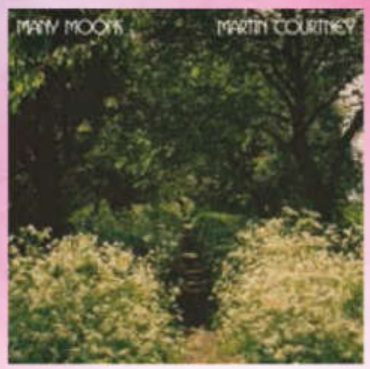
After *Lonerism*, Parker became a bonafide star, the kind who gets asked to record multiple tracks on Mark Ronson's star-packed *Uptown Special*. If he tried to expand on that formula in some way, I was ready for it to flop. Tame Impala's most recent LP, *Currents*, could have been that misstep. It's a rock record with very few moments that read as rock, and certainly the biggest deviation from the John-Lennon-on-acid vibe they had going for a while. It could have been one of those grandiose, confounding almost-failures, the kind that are dug up and re-evaluated decades later. (Think about how Devendra Banhart brought David Crosby's initially maligned *If I Could Only Remember My Name* back into the conversation in the aughts, turning it into a touchstone for a new generation of blazed-out freak-folkers.)

Currents is not a failure, though. Not even a little bit. While the song structures are similar to the band's past releases, with long buildups that lead to great psychedelic bursts, it's also much more electronic-based, showcasing enlarged arrangements and a soulful brand of synth wizardry that's as palatable for the EDM generation as it is for psych-rock weirdos. Tame Impala stretched itself to make the most ambitious work possible, and it worked. Even if it had flopped, it wouldn't have been a career-ender, and the same is true for whatever they do next. Tame Impala has room to screw up. We trust them now, and that's a pretty good sign.

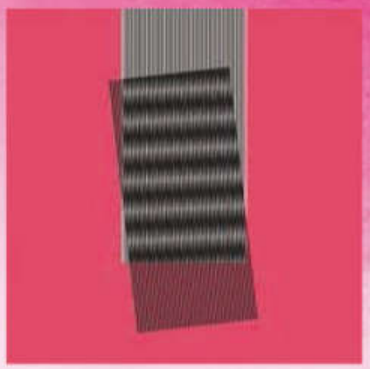
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Many Moons



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BOB MOSES
Days Gone By



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N.E.R.D

How a bunch of superfans invented the rap internet

Story by Matthew Trammell



PHOTOGRAPHY EMILY KEEGIN.

Funk Is Not A Fad



invite the light

featuring Snoop Dogg, Q-Tip, Leon Sylvers III, Flea + Ariel Pink

stonesthrow.com

Back when Pharrell Williams and Chad Hugo were busy producing mega-hits as The Neptunes, their rock-straddling side project N.E.R.D was rustling up a Grateful Dead-like cult following on the internet. Throughout the early 2000s, a couple hundred superfans flocked to two parallel, overlapping web forums—the official Star Trak forum and the rawer fan-site theneptunes.org—to swap behind-the-scenes info, post unreleased band demos, and soak up knowledge that they'd go on to pour into their own creative endeavors. Many frequent users went on to lead global cults of their own: alums include M.I.A., Drake, Janelle Monae, Tyler, the Creator, and more. N.E.R.D's forums not only served as a talent incubator but also planted the seed for the industry's full turn toward the internet as the primary means of music distribution, criticism and debate, and direct-to-fan engagement. Here, four of the forums' users—producer Matt Martian, artist manager Shiv Pandya, rapper Remy Banks, and video director Shomi Patwary—reflect on their time spent lurking and learning.

Shiv Pandya: I first really got into the forums sometime in early high school. My whole internet existence at that time was finding music that was leaked online, and places where the people sharing it were talking about just one thing.

Matt Martian: The forum is where you would go to find all the rare Neptunes songs, the scratch vocals. Certain people had inside information.

Remy Banks: It was like an underground cult for kids that actually knew.

Pandya: There would be little stories shared on the forums. They would talk about people, like [Pharrell's former manager] Rob Walker, or about a studio session that happened but the song was never released. Those tidbits that you never got to hear anywhere else. It made you feel like you were a part of what was really going on, getting to know the backstories of how things come about.

Shomi Patwary: Forums were the only social media type of thing that existed. It was the earliest form of social media, basically.

Martian: The unofficial forum, which we called the Grindin' forum—that's where I met Janelle Monae. I met Tyler. M.I.A. used to be on that one. That was the one that was the free-for-all. Drake used to be on that one.

Banks: I first heard Drake there. He had a song with Malice from The Clipse. Somebody posted it in the threads, and I'm like, "What? Who's this dude Drake?" Then I was like, "Oh, it's that dude from *Degrassi*." Then it was a whole thread about that.

Pandya: I started working with Ryan Lewis my senior year of high school, so, like, 2004. Even early on, forums were big for how we gauged whether people were talking about the music. We would post shit to see if anyone reacted. To this day, that shit still goes on.

Patwary: At the time, I was a producer; I was making beats on Fruity Loops with jacked Neptunes sounds. Other producers weren't as computer-savvy as I was, so I would represent for them. Any of those local producers from Virginia that were doing something N.E.R.D-related, I was the one trying to videotape it on a small VHS camera. This isn't even digital. You have to convert the video and then figure out what format to use, and it would look crazy. I was one of the few who could show all the fan-forum guys, "Here's me in the N.E.R.D studio, here's a picture of Pharrell's plaque."

Pandya: When the leak of the Common album [2005's Kanye West-produced *Be*] came out and it had the studio version of "The Food" featuring Kanye West on it, everybody on the forum was like, "The live version from *Chappelle's Show* was better." When the final album dropped, it had the live performance of "The Food" instead of the studio version. I remember reading threads where people felt like they were responsible for that change. Maybe somebody did read that and brought it up in a meeting, like, "Yo Kanye, you should put the live version on the album instead of the studio version. Nobody likes the leaked studio version." That sense of a kid in his bedroom having any sort of influence on this person creating something around the world is really powerful. It's powerful to know that voice could get heard, and not just in a monetary or business sense, but people appreciate how somebody feels about them.

Martian: I'm in Atlanta, Georgia, at the time. I'm in the sixth grade. Having people in other cities that felt the same way as you, I had never felt nothing like that before.

Patwary: For black kids and Asian kids, we'd never seen ourselves being represented like that. Seeing Pharrell, the black kids are like, "We've never seen somebody that's wearing Vans and skateboarding. It's OK to be different." Pharrell was the prototype for that. For Asian kids, with Chad, even though I'm Bengali, just seeing somebody that's Asian being in the industry was like, "Holy shit." My parents were like, "You better finish up school, get your science degree." But these guys changed my life.

Martian: The whole punk attitude of being a minority and being able to do something cool with it and put a twist to it—that's what N.E.R.D solidified. The reason Drake is so smart, the reason M.I.A. is so smart, the reason those people are so smart—you have to understand the fan element first. Your fans sell your music to people. They understand what it's like to be a fanatic, so they know what's going to make people care. When you're on those forums, you see what matters to the fans.

Patwary: Looking back on it, it's like the nerdiest thing ever—no pun intended. But that's what it was, a bunch of nerds. At that time, "nerd" could still apply. You could actually be a nerd. Now, you can't be a nerd. The definition of a "nerd" doesn't exist anymore. We're all nerds.

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Night Slugs

How a London crew bucked genre and became electronic music's future

Story by
Julianne Escobedo Shepherd



PHOTOGRAPHY EMILY KEEGIN.



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Genre distinctions in DJ culture can be oppressively rigid. House nights can become strictly house nights and hover in the same BPM for hours. Rave flyers often feel the need to clarify if a DJ is going to play jungle *and* drum & bass. Rap and R&B—let alone grime—are too often left out of techno or disco sets.

But Night Slugs are masters of the kind of globe-trotting playlists that push traditional pop and club structures into unexpected, thrilling contortions. A few years ago, when the London label and party collective was still a baby, co-proprietor Bok Bok articulated his ethos in one compact Gchat message to me: "There's no such thing as 'retro' music or 'future' music—it's one and the same," he wrote. "It's those wormhole connections between different places, scenes, styles that interest us most." Night Slugs' selections have always been driven solely by their instinct for unlikely bangers, never hewing to de rigueur hits, predictable staples, or modern, pale imitations of whatever style some A&R happens to think is cool at the moment. Their productions swirl house, grime, hip-hop, acid, bass, electro, R&B, and whatever else into a boxfresh mix. They revel in the power of the internet to amplify these disparate, sometimes underappreciated sound worlds, and are always reverent of the diverse peoples and cultures who created them.

Back when Bok Bok (Alex Sushon) and L-Vis 1990 (James Connolly) formed Night Slugs in 2010, it was just a small party in London, but as word got out, their enterprise expanded to events around the world, a full-blown label, a monthly show on Rinse.FM, and a movement that resonated so strongly it birthed a sister label, Los Angeles' Fade to Mind. Night Slugs released instant club classics like Girl Unit's "Wut" and Bok Bok's "Silo Pass," and reissued Dat Oven's long-lost NYC vogue staple "Icy Lake." Its founders helped launch careers for adjacent artists like Kelela and Javeon McCarthy, and never stopped releasing their own tracks, each its own master class in running dystopian grime and Miami bass through an industrial incinerator.

As the crew has grown up, it's remained as playful and unorthodox as ever. Jam City's amazing 2015 LP, *Dream a Garden*, sounds like Arthur Russell meeting Ashford & Simpson, an unexpected turn to melodic post-punk just as he was being pegged as Night Slugs' resident synth maximalist. In more recent L-Vis collaborator Lafawndah, we're hearing a way out of R&B's post-Weeknd somnambulist slump through decisive sounds and a distinct lack of lethargy. None of it plays by any rules.

Today L-Vis 1990 lives in New York, which means you can go to a Night Slugs rave in Brooklyn, lose your friends in the fog machine, feel like a cyborg, and sweat from your face. This is the most fun you will ever have in a warehouse, the ideal of underground dance club culture in 2015: nimble, malleable, gritty, queer, young, and utterly devoted to the united groove. It's music for a generation that doesn't believe in much, but understands the power of coming together on the dancefloor.

"This is the most fun you will ever have in a warehouse, the ideal of underground dance club culture in 2015."

IN AN ERA OF SINGLES FOR THE MOMENT, AN ALBUM FOR THE AGES

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3

The true champions in culture are the ones who make everyone else feel like they're winning too. Here, we've got longreads on three icons of the recent past and certain future: RIHANNA, DRAKE, and GUCCI MANE.

Champion

Sound

In a world of phonies, RIHANNA is the realest. How she manages this, we may never know.

Rihality

Story by Mary H.K. Choi
Photography by Renata Raksha
Self-Portraits by Rihanna x Renata Raksha
Styling by Shibon Kennedy





As I'm writing this, there are members of the Rihanna Navy lined up on the sidewalk outside the Macy's in downtown Brooklyn. They're waiting for Rihanna to appear and perform at the unveiling of her seventh perfume, RiRi, on Monday. That's in three days. They've been there since 6 a.m. Plenty of time to wonder what she'll wear. What she'll say.

I get it. I've waited for Rihanna too. In fact, I'm waiting for her right now. The whole deal with this cover story was that she wouldn't grant us any facetime, or phone time, but agreed to answer five questions over email.

Thing is, I knew she could go ghost. Not just because she can, which she can. Not just because of Beyoncé's recent *Vogue* September issue cover story, where Pulitzer-prize winner Margo Jefferson wrote a killer writearound with zero involvement or comment from Bey's camp. But because I've been in exactly this position before—seven times, actually, if you count each leg of Rihanna's 777 Tour in 2012.

From Mexico City to Berlin and Toronto to Stockholm, I've waited for Rihanna. Once, I waited on the tarmac at Charles de Gaulle airport for three hours because she wasn't quite finished shopping for lingerie at Chantal Thomas. After which she stopped at La Perla, another very nice underwear store. This was documented on Rihanna's Instagram, and Just Jared's. I think she ran into Puffy at La Perla.

At the time I—along with 140 other journalists, a handful of fans, and a caravan of international contest winners—was sleep-deprived, hungry, and utterly fucked sideways from back-to-back redeye flights. The tour was the brainchild of Rihanna and her manager Jay Brown. A Boeing 777 furnished by Delta would squire a roving enclave of carefully selected individuals to visit 7 countries in 7 days for 7 Rihanna concerts and parties to commemorate her 7th studio album in as many years.

There's a special kind of confusion and circadian loopiness that accompanies landing in different countries one after the other without ever seeing daylight. It makes you feel insane. A documentary was shot to capture the trip for posterity, and in it Brown states that the whole point was so other people would know what it feels like to live like Rihanna.

I can't say what it's like to be Rihanna, but judging by that week, I'd guess it feels like being a jetlagged basketcase in a hostage situation. I do know that the very special circumstances surrounding that tour conditioned me to become more obsessed with her, and that three years later, she comes up a lot. I have discussed, at length, over drinks, whether or not she works out. How many phones she has. If she ever gets sick. If there exists a man who could date her and, more importantly, who we'd want that man to be, because surely we deserve a vote, because stars are just like us, and of all stars, Rihanna feels the most real. I believe this is a sentiment shared by many of her fans, even ones who were never trapped on a plane with her. Still, I can't picture Rihanna jogging. Or going to the dentist. I usually envision Rihanna in the sun, languidly smoking. In short, I can only imagine things that she's already shown us.

Rihanna wasn't always this space-alien famous. I actually interviewed her once before. It was in 2007, right before *Good Girl Gone Bad*, her third album. She had released major singles—"Pon de Replay" was catchy; I knew "SOS" but was irked by its tinny Soft Cell sample; "Unfaithful" was riotously maudlin, though it's since grown on me a lot. But at this point, to me, Robyn Fenty occupied the same space as a Cassie. I thought she was *cute*—faint and extraordinarily inaccurate praise should you consider her now.

With *Good Girl Gone Bad* came "Umbrella," a song you couldn't help but surrender to. The album's title was a little on the nose, sure, but it gave you some indication of where Rihanna was headed. She had just gotten a haircut—this asymmetrical, angular, jet-black, lopsided Posh Spice-type lob. It was the sort of declarative hairdo you acquire when you've shucked the trappings of one life to begin another.

The profile I was writing was her first cover. My editors expressed concern that she'd seem a little dry or boring. They wondered if there was any *there* there. This was long ago, when the first iPhone wasn't out yet. She didn't have all those tattoos.

We met in a beautiful house with a pool in the Hollywood Hills. I recall how flattered she was when I said I liked her new look, how she laughed and thanked me when I said she resembled an assassin. We were both wearing gold bamboo earrings. We listened to "Umbrella" together in the kitchen of the house where we took photos; it was the first time I heard it. Her forever bestie, Melissa Forde, was there. Rihanna was wearing roller skates, which she was deeply unhappy about. She requested to be changed out of a sea-foam miniskirt because it was too short. She was 19. At the time, I was already older than she is now, by a year. It is amazing to me that Rihanna has felt so young, so exciting, and so still-promising for almost a decade. An irrelevant Rihanna, to me, is unfathomable.

Then, in what is still the most horrifying professional bungle of my career to date, the tape I used to record her (yep, tape) got fucked up on my flight home. I'd spent hours with her, and we'd had a great talk. Over the phone, a few days later, I apologized. She gave me another 90 minutes.

We talked about how this was the album where you'd finally be able to hear her accent. How much she wanted to act. And that of all the actors in the world, the person she most wanted to work with was Paul Walker. When he died two years ago, I wondered if she'd remember wanting that.

For almost a decade Rihanna released an album per year, but it's been over 1,000 days since her last one. Sure, there

JUMPSUIT BALENCIAGA, SHIRT ELLERY, BOOTS FENDI.

They say that certain politicians win by dint of how badly you want to have a beer with them. No one doesn't want to hang out with RIHANNA. You suspect that you could even be yourself around her.

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DRESS AWAVEAWAKE, SHIRT ROCHAS, SHOES FENTY PUMA BY RIHANNA.

have been singles, collaborations with Eminem, and "FourFiveSeconds" with Kanye West and Paul McCartney. There was "Bitch Better Have My Money," a single and video that she directed with a quartet of French men who go by the name MegaForce. There was the Met Ball dress, Maori hand tattoos in New Zealand, tours through Dubai, and crop overs at #heauxm. Countless magazine covers. Her River Island collaboration. MAC Cosmetics deal. Dior ads. Hosiery collaborations. PUMA campaign. Among this all, her music is more relevant than ever: in July of this year, she became the first artist to surpass 100 million gold and platinum certifications encompassing 37 separate singles to be the winningest chart-topper in the history of cochleae.

Since summer 2014, Rihanna has acknowledged an upcoming eighth album by using the umbrella hashtag #R8. There have been maddening video snippets of her at work in the studio, sessions with legendary vocal coach Kuk Harrell, and rumors that the project will introduce a reinvented sound, a new Rihanna. In November 2014, Dash Radio host DJ Skee said an album was "closer than anyone realized," to which Rihanna responded on Twitter: "ANY news about #R8 will be delivered directly from me!!!!" Four months later, while promoting the blockbuster movie *Home*, she told MTV she wants "soulful," "forever" songs to "perform in 15 years" that will still feel like they represent her then. She has yet to formally announce the album's tracklist or release date.

For all this time, anxious fans have been able to feel a sense of access to her, through Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter. Rolling that blunt on the Coachella security guard's head, playing dress-up with baby Majesty, she feels like she belongs to us. They say that certain politicians win by dint of how badly you want to have a beer with them. No one doesn't want to hang out with Rihanna. You suspect that you could even be yourself around her. Have fun. She certainly looks like she's having a blast. On the one hand, it's hard not to want for her, at 27, to have a break from the rigors of the Q4 album rollout, to cheer her on for pausing and taking some time. On the other, you can't help but wonder if she's sometimes felt just plainly over music.

If this were a normal story, I'd tell you what she ordered if we'd gone to Giorgio Baldis, her favorite L.A. restaurant, even though she pretty much always gets the same thing (fried calamari and pasta with tomato sauce). I'd tell you if she smelled like Reb'l Fleur, her old fragrance, or, if she's wearing RiRi, and what that smells like. The story wouldn't be so much about what she said in response to my questions—Rihanna is media-trained—it would be about registering any silences. Or flickers of eyelid. Or churlishness. Or evasiveness. It would be reading tea leaves. It makes you wonder why any savvy celebrity would ever agree to an interview, and understand why in this case Rihanna did not.

But as agreed, I did send over five questions. In fact, *we* sent five questions. I enlisted a trusted group of women who are similarly sparkly-eyed about Rihanna and her place in the pantheon of pop-culture goddesses, and we came up with some bangers. We did want to know what was so special about *R8* that it warranted such a lag. We nixed all questions of men. We decided we don't care about Leo or whatever is going on with her and Travi$ Scott. (Truthfully, we want to know everything about what's going on with Travi$ Scott, but why waste a question with one that she'd rightfully not answer?) We wanted to know if she was ever alone and how it felt. What she does for self-care. How payroll works when you hire all your best friends. How she makes sure she attends important personal events like #DAVIS420WEDDING when she is quite literally Rihanna. If being Rihanna in Barbados feels any different from being Rihanna in New York. In short, we wanted some insight into the life that she shows us glimpses of but never talks about. Some revelation that would normalize her, help us understand what makes her seem so well-adjusted despite the rigors of her mega fame. Advice that we could, perhaps, incorporate into our own much smaller lives.

I am fairly sure I'll never again be on a plane with Rihanna. Or on a phone call. And if there are no more Rihanna interviews in the world from now on, I think that's OK. Or at least it seems fair. Five answers would do little to slake the immeasurable collective thirst of everyone who spends any time wondering about her. The mythic ideal of this woman who has remained in front of us, without our ever tiring of her, in an artful, sophisticated dance.

We keep on insisting, or at least wanting, a blueprint or a calculable algorithm to justify how she feels as knowable to us as a friend who made it without inspiring any resentment or jealousy. We feel like we're given a vision of her that is real because she chooses not to portray herself as perfect, which only makes us believe that she is. And maybe there's no way to explain it. Rihanna just has to be it. God knows we'll take it.

HAIR BY YUSEF WILLIAMS. MAKEUP BY MYLAH MORALES. NAILS BY KIMMIE KYEES. SET DESIGN BY DAVID BROWNE. LEOTARD MARYAM NASSIR ZADEH. JEWELRY DIOR, AND NATAF JOAILLERIE.



Mr. Universe

In a rare interview, DRAKE defines the uncanny gifts that have made him a cultural giant—and a target.

Story by Leon Neyfakh
Photography by Mark Peckmezian





The summer of 2015 ended the moment Serena Williams lost in the semifinals of the U.S. Open, and in the stands, watching it happen, was Drake. He had come to cheer for Serena amid rumors that the two were dating, and he spent most of the match on his feet, clapping with vigor and making intense faces that were projected onto TV screens all over the world.

When the match ended, Drake became the receptacle for all the disbelief and disappointment that was provoked by Serena's stunning defeat. Within minutes, Twitter alighted with jokes about the "Drake curse," and soon the hashtag #BlameDrake was trending all over the United States.

Maybe it would have happened to whomever Serena Williams was supposedly dating at the time—with a historic Grand Slam on the line, the stakes were high, and the need for a scapegoat was profound. But something about the hostility Drake faced after the match felt tailor-made for Aubrey Graham, and not unrelated to the summer-long winning streak he had been enjoying at the time of Serena's loss. The reaction confirmed what had already started to become obvious: that Drake, a rapper who was once best known for being a Canadian child star working in a genre where he didn't quite fit in, was no longer any kind of underdog. Instead, he had become a target, the kind of cultural giant who inspires love and irritation in equal measure.

On a balmy Tuesday night in August, about a month before that tennis match, Drake sits in a low-lit hotel suite in Toronto, his legs stretched out in front of him and his black Timberlands up on a coffee table. Holding what looks like a glass of Hennessy dressed with huge ice cubes at his side, he's talking about how he recently started driving himself places again.

"I've been deprived of driving for a long time," he says. "Riding to the studio with a driver and security and stuff, you lose something."

It used to be that driving to the recording studio was when he would come up with ideas, Drake explains. Cutting it out of his life felt like leaving inspiration on the table.

"That ride was my favorite thing in the world, you know?" he says. "And before that ride, it wasn't going to the studio, it was going to my girl's house, or going wherever. Driving was just one of the most pivotal things in my writing life."

Driving was how Drake put himself in the mindset of the people he imagined listening to him. When he was trying to figure out if a song was working, he would picture someone playing it in their car. "Especially on this new record, I just want you to be able to..." he trails off. "Sometimes those drives are heavy, man, depending on what happened where you came from and what's about to happen where you're going."

The new record Drake is talking about is *Views From the 6*, so named after Toronto, the city that is his birthplace, his muse, and his cause. His reps say the LP doesn't have a release date yet but will be coming out "imminently," and like every major release Drake has put out since his 2009 mixtape, *So Far Gone*, it will be released into a world where more people are paying attention to him than ever before. Starting with that first record, Drake has been leveling up continuously, and with the huge year he has just had, *Views* will represent the culmination of yet another growth spurt.

To recap: at the start of summer 2014, Drake posted a song called "0-100/The Catch Up" on his SoundCloud page and watched it turn into a runaway hit with barely any official promotion. Then, in February, he released a surprise mixtape called *If You're Reading This It's Too Late*, which was comprised of 17 songs that, at one point, all appeared on Billboard's 50-song Hot R&B/Hip-Hop chart simultaneously. Six even newer tracks—two of which Drake premiered on the Apple Music radio show that his label, OVO Sound, began hosting this summer as part of a reported $19 million deal—subsequently sneaked into the Hot 100. As we sit down to talk, the only remaining trace of the recent turbulence Drake experienced during an unexpected clash with Meek Mill is a Top 40 hit in the form of "Back to Back," a diss track Drake released in the midst of the conflagration. And to cap it off, one week after our interview, he'll fly to Atlanta to record a mixtape with Future called *What a Time to Be Alive*, which will go on to sell a projected half-million copies in its opening week.

I ask him, as he takes a slow sip of his drink, whether in light of his recent triumphs, he worries at all that he's had it too easy—whether there's any risk that he'll start taking for granted his ability to connect with listeners.

He sounds frankly disgusted with the idea. "I've never felt like, 'Oh, people will bite at anything that's Drake,'" he says. "I'm just not that guy. I don't feel that way about any of my music... If it didn't connect, I would have a huge problem."

He pauses for a second, then continues, leaning into every word: "I mean, I'm really trying. It's not like I'm just sitting here, just fuckin' shooting with my eyes closed. Like, I'm *trying*. I'm really trying to make music for your life."

As he says this, Drake projects a practiced but convincing friendliness, and the effort he's putting into making sure I know he's being sincere is palpable and disarming. Still, looking at his newly close-shaved hair and the beard that now covers the lower half of his face like armor, I remember the advice he gave recently on one of his songs—*Please do not speak to me like I'm that Drake from four years ago/ I'm at a higher place*—and make a point of taking it.

This will be the first extended interview Drake has given since *Rolling Stone* published a story in February of 2014 that

PHOTOGRAPHED AT CRYSTAL BALLROOM (PREVIOUS SPREAD) AND HALLWAY (LEFT), THE OMNI KING EDWARD HOTEL, TORONTO. STYLING NICKY ORENSTEIN. MAKEUP LUISA DURAN. ASSISTANT STYLIST HAZEL ONG.

moved him to declare on Twitter that he would no longer be talking to magazines. It's also the first time he has opened himself up to questions about a set of recordings that leaked this summer: so-called reference tracks for songs off *If You're Reading This* that suggested Drake had based at least some of his verses on demos composed for him by other people.

By the time we're done talking, Drake will have addressed those recordings, and opened a window onto the superpowers that allow him, more than almost anyone else in pop, to make music that is new and unfamiliar, but still deeply, widely, and reliably resonant. In the process, he will make a spirited case for collaboration in hip-hop, and put forth a vision of what it takes to make truly original and era-defining art.

For most of the year, Drake's focus has been on *Views From the 6*. Undertaking the high-stakes project, he tells me, required him to hunker down in Toronto in a way he hadn't really done in a while. After years of constant touring, sneaking in recording sessions whenever he could, and treating Los Angeles as his headquarters, Drake came home and locked in with his longtime engineer and producer, Noah "40" Shebib, the man he forged his sound with, and the friend who has been his closest creative partner since the beginning.

The choice to stay local while working on *Views* was a response to growing up: at 28, Drake says, he has realized that some of his best friends may no longer be at a point in their lives to "chase me around the globe anymore." Drake and 40, in particular, have had to renegotiate the terms of their partnership. "We've grown a lot over the years," Drake says. "He used to be the guy that would track me in hotel rooms at 4 a.m. And now he is not that guy—I have another guy that does that."

He needed 40 for *Views*, though, he says. "If I want to make the album I want to make, I have to go find him. I have to go sit with him, and we have to really put in effort."

It's a marked contrast from the way Drake made *What a Time to Be Alive*—he and Future recorded it in just six days in Atlanta, working at night, sleeping in the studio, then waking up and working some more, according to Metro Boomin, the tape's executive producer—and *If You're Reading This It's Too Late*, which was also completed relatively quickly, in three months, and was dominated by beats from Boi-1da and Vinylz. "That was really just me doing one song at a time and just organizing them in an order that I thought sounded really good," he says of *If You're Reading This*. "It was like an offering—that's what it was. It was just an offering. I just wanted you to have something to start the year off. I wanted to be the first one. I wanted to set it off properly."

The day before our interview, word came that *If You're Reading This* had gone platinum. It was an unbelievable achievement, given that the project came out with no warning and no official single, and that Drake made a point of describing it as a mixtape rather than a proper album. The message seemed to be that it stood apart from the rest of Drake's catalogue—that it was somehow a lesser work than his proper LPs. When I tell Drake that the tape sounded as cohesive to me as any "real" album I heard this year, he says, "I appreciate the compliment," but disagrees.

"By the standard I hold myself and 40 to, it's a bit broken," he says. "There's corners cut, in the sense of fluidity and song transition, and just things that we spend weeks and months on that make our albums what they are."

Perhaps not unlike the Future project, the tape was conceived as a palate cleanser, Drake says—a wild sprint he wanted to get out of his system before turning to the marathon that would be *Views*. "It was the set up to be able to return to working solely with 40, which is where I'm at now," he says, explaining that the new album has involved collaborating more intimately with 40 than he has since *Take Care*. "I just wanted to be able to come back to that and have it be important."

Recording *Views From the 6* in Toronto has aligned nicely with the arrival of an intense new phase in Drake's campaign on behalf of his beloved city. That campaign has been going on for years, but the portrait Drake has been painting lately of "the 6" has been more emphatic and textured than ever. It is no longer possible, as it once was, to mistake his local boosterism with a desire to just be from somewhere, nor confuse it with a vain aspiration to bring glory to a city with little pre-existing cachet.

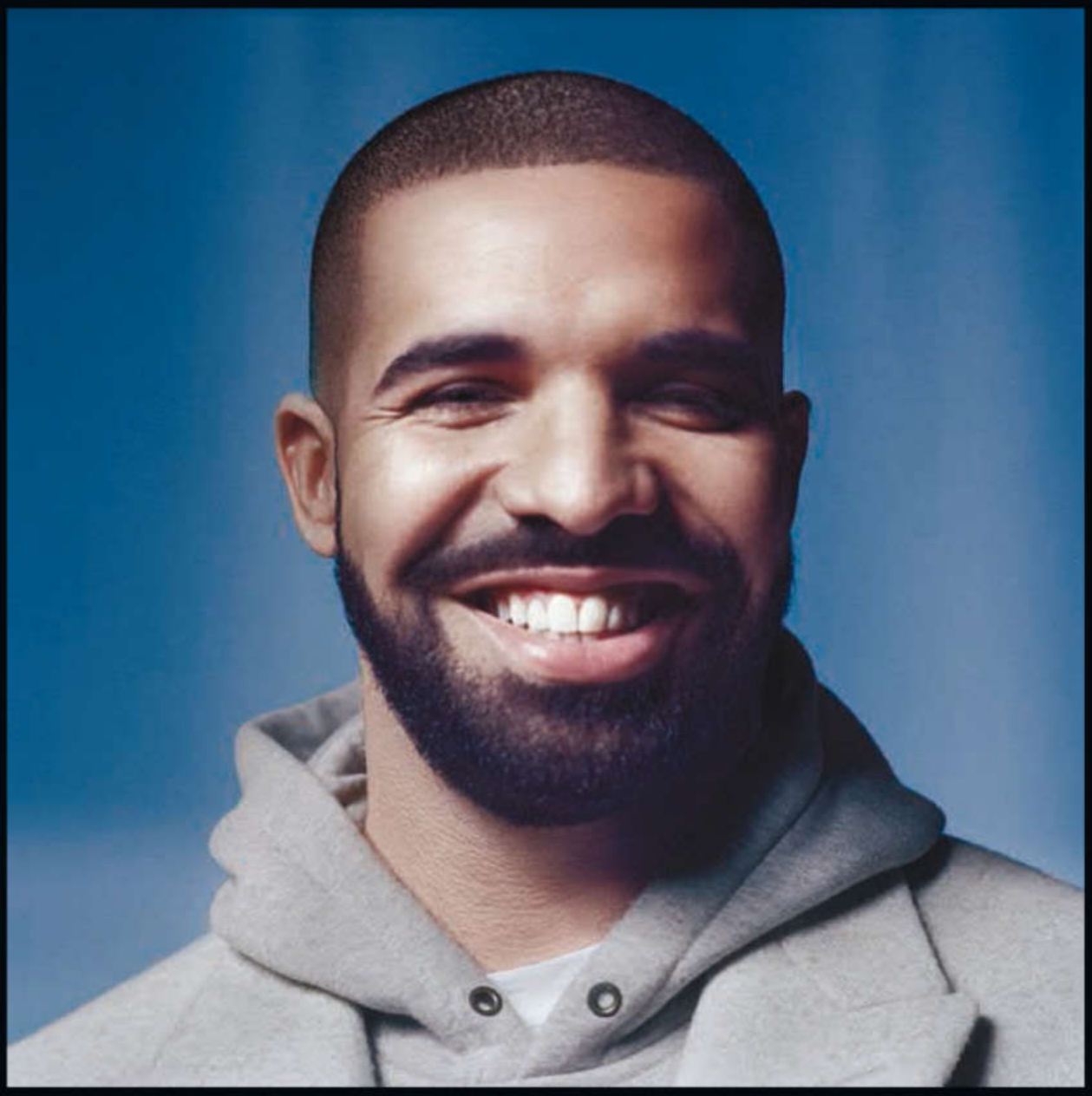
It helps that Drake finally gave Toronto an anthem this year in "Know Yourself," the standout track on *If You're Reading This* that had teenagers and adults all over America chanting about "running through the 6" with their woes.

"I always used to be so envious, man, that Wiz Khalifa had that song 'Black and Yellow,' and it was just a song about Pittsburgh," Drake says. "Like, the world was singing a song about *Pittsburgh*! And I was just so baffled, as a songwriter, at how you stumbled upon a hit record about Pittsburgh. Like, your city must be elated! They must be so proud. And I told myself, over the duration of my career, I would definitely have a song that strictly belonged to Toronto but that the world embraced. So, 'Know Yourself' was a big thing off my checklist."

What distinguishes Drake's devotion to Toronto from generic hometown pride is that it comes across as the opposite of provincial. This is a testament to Toronto's unique cultural diversity: the city's population is about 50 percent foreign born, with immigrant communities from countries like Jamaica, the Philippines, India, and many others. To be influenced by Toronto, in other words, is to be influenced by cultures from all over the world.

PHOTOGRAPHED AT THE VANITY FAIR BALLROOM, THE OMNI KING EDWARD HOTEL, TORONTO.





"I know everything. I know everything that's being said about you. I know everything that's being said about me. I'm very in tune with this life."

Drake has been channeling those diverse inputs with great enthusiasm lately, most obviously in his use of Toronto-by-way-of-the-Caribbean slang (*ting*, *touching road*, *talkin' boasy and gwanin' wassy*) and even religious Arabic words like *mashallah* and *wallahi*, a wink to Toronto's Somali population. "We use [that lingo] every day," he says, "but it just took me some time to build up the confidence to figure out how to incorporate it into songs. And I'm really happy that I did. I think it's important for the city to feel like they have a real presence out there."

The fact that Drake's not at all worried about alienating non-Toronto fans who don't know what certain words mean is arguably the true measure of his tire pressure right now. And insofar as he is making Toronto more of an ever-present, fleshed-out character in his music than he used to, it's because he knows he has the standing to do so. "I've just become really adamant about leaving fragments in everything I do that belong strictly to my city," he says. "The world will pick up on it."

Drake's use of slang doesn't feel like tourism because his attraction to these cultures seems so genuine, and he's forged real-life relationships with artists from scenes based abroad whose influence is felt in Toronto. His admiration for Popcaan, the Jamaican dancehall star, has given rise to an alliance between OVO and Popcaan's Unruly Gang that resulted in a 22-minute documentary about the OVO team visiting Unruly in Jamaica; later, the patois spoken in that film ended up serving as the source material for dialogue that appeared on *If You're Reading This*.

Drake's interest in the music of London grime MC Skepta, meanwhile, has given him the rare gift of a true companion—not an insignificant thing for the rapper who once proclaimed a "no new friends" policy as a way of dealing with newfound fame. "I was a Skepta fan, but after meeting Skepta... we were brothers immediately," Drake says. "You don't get that too much in this thing that we're in, honestly. You don't [often] meet somebody and actually feel like, 'OK, we might actually still talk when we're 35, 40 years old.'"

Through these affiliations and collaborations—there was also a song with Bachata star Romeo Santos in which Drake sang in Spanish—Drake has become a kind of cultural importer-exporter, or perhaps more accurately, a translator.

I ask him if part of the motivation behind his international outreach is a desire to build audiences in foreign markets—to become a truly global star, having already conquered North America as much as any rapper ever has. On some level, I ask, is doing a song like this summer's "Ojuelegba (Remix)," which he recorded with Skepta over a hit single by the popular Nigerian rapper Wizkid, a savvy play for audience share?

Drake is not into this theory. "I just did it because I was in the moment," he says. "I wasn't thinking like, 'Oh man, I gotta get my brand up in Nigeria.'" (He hastens to add, with classic Drake politeness, "Not to say that's not important. I'm super-honored to be on that song.")

More than erecting a global tentpole brand, it seems Drake is reaching out for inspiration and new ideas about how a Drake song can sound. On *What a Time to Be Alive*, you can hear him trying to level with Future as he battles his sorrows with pills and lean, but much of Drake's other recent output finds him working through influences that actually seem to have brightened him up musically—an almost unthinkable turn of events for an artist whose aesthetic has long been described as cold and wintery. New songs like the tropical-sounding "Hotline Bling" have a gorgeous-sunset quality to them that Drake hasn't really conjured before; to borrow a metaphor from Lorde, who praised "Hotline Bling" on Twitter recently for its pristine yet evocative simplicity, he is painting with colors—reds, oranges, pinks—he didn't really used to use.

Drake says this new warmth is not an accident—that he's making a point of rapping over beats that are a little sunnier than he's accustomed to in order to see if he can match the level of potency he knows he can achieve when working inside his gauzy, minor-key comfort zone.

"I love dancehall flows, especially as of late," he says. "I pretty much won't even rap on a beat unless it's got some magic element of new tempo or new pocket, where I hear myself and feel like I've stumbled upon something new."

This is Drake's primary and somewhat paradoxical objective these days: to stumble upon something new, whether it's a new way to blur the line between singing and rapping or just a new way to render a phrase. "There's times where I'm sitting around looking for like, three, four words," he says. "I'm not looking for, like, 80 bars on some '5AM,' 'Paris Morton'-type shit, you know? There are moments like that, too, but the hardest moments, the most difficult ones, in songwriting, are when you're looking for like, four words with the right melody and the right cadence. I pray for that. I'll take that over anything—I'll take that over sex, partying. Give me that feeling."

The best feeling of all, he says, is when he finds a whole new flow—a new way to straddle a beat and wrap his vocals around a rhythm in an unexpected way.

"A new flow is absolutely the most crucial discovery in rap, to me," Drake says. "Honestly, like, I love that I'm sitting here talking to you, but at the same time I don't, because I want to go to the studio, and I'm praying that 40 has a beat, so that I can do something new that I've never done before. That is my main joy in life."

There's a moment on "Ojuelegba (Remix)" in which that joy comes through as clearly as it ever has. The breezy, boisterous song, which Drake first heard through Skepta, forces Drake to rap in a way he's never rapped before, to the extent that it takes him a couple of bars to find the swing of the beat. As soon as he does find it (it happens right as he's singing *Pree*

PHOTOGRAPHED AT CRYSTAL BALLROOM, THE OMNI KING EDWARD HOTEL, TORONTO.

me, dem a pree me, Jamaican patois for "they're watching me") his vocals and the music click into place, and suddenly the song sounds like it could be a stateside hit.

In that moment Drake reveals one of his most consequential talents: his intuitive ability to bend the new—and thus not-quite-intelligible—into shapes that make sense to millions and millions of people.

We'll call this his first superpower, and what it allows Drake to do is take idiosyncratic songs that haven't caught all the way on yet and tune them to a frequency everyone can hear. Most famously, he did this with the Migos flow on his remix of their hit "Versace" and the froggy iLoveMakonnen croon on "Tuesday." More recently, he did it on "Sweeterman (Remix)," which was originally recorded and released by a 21-year-old from Toronto of Egyptian descent who calls himself Ramriddlz. More of a cover than a remix, Drake's version of "Sweeterman" captured him in full-on sponge mode, borrowing all of the original's best features—the tiny melody behind *she keeps giving me looks*, the word *adunanane*—and tightening them up, while removing Ramriddlz's voice entirely.

In recording his take on "Sweeterman," Drake did something he has done repeatedly throughout his career, latching onto a set of charming but off-kilter ideas, running them through his proprietary filter, and shining them down into jewels. By applying his populist instincts to genuinely weird music, Drake has learned new moves, and in exchange for giving up-and-comers the invaluable boost that accompanies his co-sign, he has had the opportunity to introduce one new sound after another into the mainstream. It's an innovation model, basically: as an artist who is single-mindedly focused on improving and not repeating himself, Drake is serious about staying ahead of the curve, and he approaches it systematically.

When I ask him what makes him want to jump on a song like "Sweeterman," Drake says something surprising. "It's just channeling my mom," he says. "Like, I'd bring home an essay that I did really well on, and my mom would read it through and give me notes back—on the essay that I just scored like 94 on! So sometimes I just do that. I'll hear people's stuff and... I'll just give my interpretation of how I would have done it."

That's not meant to be taken offensively, he adds: "It's just, literally, I've recognized the potential and the greatness in this piece, and I want to take my stab at it too—which is kind of what my mom always did, you know? She was just reliving her school days. Like, she just wanted to really write the essay herself. But I had already done it, so she just kind of gave me new paragraphs and sentences and made it better."

What Drake is describing here, it seems, is craftsmanship and perfectionism. But while those are obviously crucial factors of his success, they wouldn't count for all that much on their own.

Which is where Drake's second superpower comes in.

You could call it his emotional imagination. But in fact it's something more specific: a gift for understanding his fans and intuitively knowing how to activate, and lay claim to, their feelings. Drake is an interpreter, in other words, of the people he is trying to reach—an artist who can write lyrics that wide swaths of listeners will want to take ownership of and hooks that we will all want to sing to ourselves as we walk down the street.

When I ask Drake about how he gets audiences to identify with him in this way, especially now that his life is so extraordinary and strange, he sits up and lays out the elemental chemistry of his music.

"We may be worlds apart in the sense of, you know, where you're from, where I'm from, what I'm doing, what you're doing—but what are we talking about?" he says. "We're talking about very simple human emotions. We're talking about love, sometimes. We're talking about triumph, we're talking about failure, we're talking about nerves. We're talking about fear. We're talking about doubt. It doesn't matter what you're doing—you gotta at least hear what I'm saying to you. And I pray that it helps."

At this he interrupts himself. "Not even 'helps,'" he says. "'Helps' is a weird word. I don't ever want to think I'm 'helping.' It's not about helping. It's more like, even though we're not carrying on a dialogue, I hear you, you know? And when I make an album, all I want you to know is I hear you."

You can tell he's thinking this through as he says it, and as he goes on, it feels kind of like watching someone earnestly arrive at a mission statement on the fly: "Like, I get everything," he says. "I know everything. I know everything that's being said about you. I know everything that's being said about me. I'm very in tune with this life. Much like, I assume, most of my listeners are."

In this light, listening to Drake's songs—loving them, internalizing them, feeling #chargedup when you feel like taking a swing at somebody and #worstbehaviour when you're amped at a party—is a collaborative process between artist and fan. Drake writes songs that encourage that intimacy, and in so doing he consistently finds words for yearnings and aspirations shared by his wildly diverse fanbase. In making hits, he is gifting his listeners those words so that they might express themselves—online, at school, at work, in their own heads—with the benefit of his verve.

On some level, Drake's ability to do this comes down to his ear for catchy, evocative phrases that are vague enough to be used across many contexts, but specific enough to still feel vivid and personal. But he's also just good at reading his moment—figuring out what his fans want at any given time and delivering it on schedule.

This sense of timing turned out to be a crucial weapon for Drake this summer when he was pulled into the battle

with Meek Mill. Though Drake initially seemed to ignore the surprise attack, it quickly turned into a two-week long demonstration of his skills as an entertainer and his ability to execute on them. In more dramatic fashion than ever, Drake flexed his showmanship, and made fluent use of all the communication channels that are open between him and his fans.

The conflict started when Meek Mill asserted on Twitter that Drake had someone else write his lyrics for him on a verse he had recorded for Meek's recent album. It escalated when Hot 97 DJ Funkmaster Flex boasted that someone in Drake's camp had provided him with multiple "reference tracks"—demos, basically, written and recorded by other rappers—that would prove that Drake made a habit of using outside writers.

Drake never spoke about the recordings directly—not even after some of them were made public. But as I prepare to raise the issue during our interview, he catches me off guard by turning to it on his own.

"I'm just gonna bring it up 'cause it's important to me," he says. "I was at a charity kickball game—which we won, by the way—and my brother called me. He was just like, 'I don't know if you're aware, but, yo, they're trying to *end* us out here. They're just spreading, like, *propaganda*. Where are you? You need to come here.' So we all circled up at the studio, and sat there as Flex went on the air, and these guys flip-flopped [about how] they were gonna do this, that, and the third."

He recorded "Charged Up" that very night and released it the next day on the same episode of OVO Radio that saw the debut of "Hotline Bling." "Given the circumstances, it felt right to just remind people what it is that I do," Drake says, a proud smile creeping into his face, "in case your opinions were wavering at any point."

When a reply to "Charged Up" didn't come, Drake could hardly believe it. "This is a discussion about music, and no one's putting forth any music?" he says, speaking with a furrowed brow, as if reliving his incredulity. "You guys are gonna leave this for me to do? This is how you want to play it? You guys didn't think this through at all—nobody? You guys have high-ranking members watching over you. Nobody told you that this was a bad idea, to engage in this and not have something? You're gonna engage in a conversation about writing music, and delivering music, with me? And not have anything to put forth on the table?"

As the days ticked by and a rebuttal from Meek Mill continued to not materialize, Drake became almost offended at the lack of hustle the other team was putting in.

"It was weighing heavy on me," he says. "I didn't get it. I didn't get how there was no strategy on the opposite end. I just didn't understand. I didn't understand it because that's just not how we operate."

It was then that he decided to just go ahead and do another song. "I was like, 'I'm gonna probably just finish this.' And I know how I have to finish it. This has to literally become the song that people want to hear every single night, and it's gonna be tough to exist during this summer when everybody wants to hear [this] song that isn't necessarily in your favor."

That song became "Back to Back," and in keeping with Drake's plan, it became an instant radio hit. In the end, Drake never felt compelled to prove his chops in some grand or gimmicky way—by going on a radio show and freestyling, for instance, or putting pictures of his handwritten lyrics on Instagram. Instead he just acted like the leaked recordings didn't matter. And a few days later, with a performance at OVO Fest—the star-studded concert he puts on every year in Toronto that opened, this time around, with a full-on sendup of his challenger—the whole thing was decisively over, with public opinion overwhelmingly on Drake's side.

The fact that most of Drake's fans seemed not to care about the particulars of how his songs were made proved something important: that Drake was no longer just operating as a popular rapper, but as a pop star, full stop, in a category with Beyoncé, Kanye West, Taylor Swift, and the many boundary-pushing mainstream acts from the past that transcended their genres and reached positions of historic influence in culture. At that altitude, it's well known that the vast majority of great songs are cooked in groups and workshopped before being brought to life by one singular talent. That is the altitude where Drake lives now.

"I need, sometimes, individuals to spark an idea so that I can take off running," he says. "I don't mind that. And those recordings—they are what they are. And you can use your own judgment on what they mean to you."

"There's not necessarily a context to them," he adds, when I ask him to provide some. "And I don't know if I'm really here to even clarify it for you."

Instead, he tells me he is ready and willing to be the flashpoint for a debate about originality in hip-hop. "If I have to be the vessel for this conversation to be brought up—you know, God forbid we start talking about writing and references and who takes what from where—I'm OK with it being me," he says.

He then makes a bigger point—one that sums up why the experience of being publicly targeted left him in a position of greater strength than he went into it with: "It's just, music at times can be a collaborative process, you know? Who came up with this, who came up with that—for me, it's like, I know that it takes me to execute every single thing that I've done up until this point. And I'm not ashamed."

The victory lap Drake has been on since ending the dispute with Meek Mill has been something to behold—performances of "Back to Back" at concerts that had thousands of people shouting along with the words; the rise of "Hotline Bling" to the Billboard Top 10; the mixtape with Future that had rap fans losing their minds as soon it was rumored to be in the works. It's a run that testifies to the third and most important thing Drake has going for him: he makes it really, really fun to be a Drake fan.

It's fun to watch him get better at rapping. It's fun to follow along with the arc of his prosperity as he clears rungs that were once impossible to imagine him clearing. Now when he releases a song in which he debuts a new flow—or appears on stage at an Apple Music event, or hosts *Saturday Night Live*, or premieres something exciting on OVO Sound Radio—there are people everywhere feeling happy for him, almost as if being on his team means they themselves have achieved something. (This good will can extend to Drake's collaborators, too: in an email, Future told The FADER, "Drake is my brother. We have a cool personal relationship, but we have an even better relationship musically," and Metro Boomin, in a phone interview, recalled the nightly dance-offs that he, Drake, and everyone else involved in *What a Time* would have in the studio to mixtape-opener "Digital Dash." After the sessions concluded, Metro said, Drake sent a custom Bape couch to his house for his 22nd birthday.)

Drake's relationship to his fans, and the mark he wants to leave on the world they live in, is something he has addressed more than once in his songs. *I'm on a mission trying to shift the culture*, as he put it on "Tuscan Leather." Or, as he rapped on "From Time," *I want to take it deeper than money, pussy, vacation/ And influence a generation that's lacking in patience*. When I ask Drake what it would mean to actually do those things, I half-expect him to say something about getting young people to realize that the internet is ruining their ability to lead authentic lives. It's a technophobic stance that he has hinted at before—even as he has demonstrated, over and over, an utterly fluent understanding of digital culture and how to harness it. But instead of being preachy in response to my question, Drake once again brings up his parents.

They're what he thinks about when he pictures his legacy, he says—the way his mom talks about the songs she listened to as a young woman on a memorable trip to Italy, or how his dad describes the first time he saw The Rolling Stones. "I just want to be a time-marker for my generation," Drake says. "Whatever my generation is—I'm 28, but I feel like maybe there's kids right now, who are 16, that might still grow up with Drake."

His choice of words here is revealing: Drake wants people to feel like they've grown up with him, like they know him and see him as a human being who is a part of their lives. "I watch other artists from the past in awe—in awe of the preparation it must have taken to, like, be that individual—the grandiose production of [it]," he says. "And I've sort of gotten by just being myself."

That, more than anything, Drake tells me, is the mark he hopes to leave: "I just want to be remembered as somebody who was himself," he tells me. "Not a product."

It's not a risk-free proposition. Because the truth is, people don't like it when their friends change, and since Drake is intent on evolving, it's inevitable that some fans will start identifying less with him and more with the spurned allies and ex-girlfriends whom he describes in his pettiest songs—the people in his life who resent him for drifting away from them or getting so big for his britches. The tough, guarded tone Drake took on *If You're Reading This* has undoubtedly cost him the loyalty of some who were attached to the softer kind of openness that he became famous for—and his growing dominance as a star surely contributes to the Twitter jokes that now accompany his every move, or the glee with which some critics deride him.

Drake has acknowledged that the change in him is real. In "You & the 6," the emotional centerpiece of *If You're Reading This*, he talks to his mom on the phone, trying to explain to her how his life is different now, and how people around him are trying to undermine him because of his status. "I can't be out here being vulnerable, mama," he tells her.

As our interview wraps up, I ask Drake whether he actually feels that way—and what he imagines he will be, in the *Views From the 6* era and beyond, if he toughens up so much that he loses the approachability that has always distinguished him.

"It's never about toughening up. I don't even know if that's, like, cool, being tough and shit," he says. "Not being vulnerable is never gonna be my thing. I'm always going to share with you what's going on in my life."

What has changed, he explains, is that he doesn't have any doubts left about how good he is, or whether he deserves the spot he has fought to secure since emerging into the public consciousness six years ago as a beguiling, expressive misfit.

"Vulnerability, to me, sometimes comes in the form of being naïve about where I am in the pecking order of all this," he says. "So I think I realize where I'm at now. And I think I realize that I'm gonna have to be OK with not having that many friends that are peers."

And with that, Drake is out—done talking, and ready, at long last, to head to the studio, where he says he and 40 will be trying to wrap the third verse of a song they initially thought might work as the opener for *Views*, but now aren't so sure. Drake seems confident they'll figure it out though. He's looking forward to doing the work.

PHOTOGRAPHED AT THE VANITY FAIR BALLROOM, THE OMNI KING EDWARD HOTEL, TORONTO.



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Photography by JJ






Skyservice










WHAT A TIME
TO BE ALIVE

Family Business





With his friends, DRAKE made OVO an institution. Now the men behind the boy are figuring out what to build next with all that power, and how they'll do it.

Story by Rawiya Kameir
Photography by Daniel Shea

Across the street from S.O.T.A. Studios, a brand new live/work complex in an industrial cul-de-sac at the edge of Toronto's West End, a blonde in a colorful sports bra and a pair of running shorts stands atop a speed boat parked in a gravel lot, cleaning it with a hose and a bucket. It's a humid August day, the sun is way up in the sky, and the neighborhood is quiet, save the occasional car driving by. The woman likely has no idea what goes on in the squat gray building 100 feet away, where Drake records and where October's Very Own—the label and clothing brand he jointly owns with manager Oliver El-Khatib and engineer and producer Noah "40" Shebib—has recently planted new roots. There are two cars parked outside; near the entrance, a pair of hockey nets is set up.

Drake has been famous since the early days of the Obama presidency. Meanwhile, the team that's buoyed his career has operated partly under shadow. Drake's OVO associates have avoided press and chosen to let Drake speak as their representative; the likable picture he's drawn in return is an aspirational folktale, of a kid from Toronto who became a star with the help of his best friends. But as Drake enters a new stratosphere of pop stardom, OVO is reckoning with what it means to scale a small business. The construction of the multi-million dollar studio and office space has marked an important step for the company—a centralization of its sprawling efforts, and a more formal approach to its undeniable growth.

S.O.T.A.—the acronym stands for "state of the art"—was built over the course of a year and a half by 40, the producer largely responsible for masterminding Drake's sound and the superintendent of the OVO Sound label. This is where he and Drake have been working on Drake's upcoming album, *Views From the 6*, but it's also 40's home; only a door separates his condo from the studio and office. In the studio's sparse and modern lounge, abstract black-and-white geometric shapes jut out from the wall, and a blue light beams from the ceiling, brightening up the space-gray decor. Everything is sleek and cold, except for a watchful wooden owl sitting alone on a white cabinet. The figure looks like the crew's official logo, a minimalist outline derived from the birdlike look of the letters that form OVO.

When I meet 40 there, he's coasting on two-and-a-half hours of sleep. (Insomniac dedication to work earned Shebib his nickname—40 is shorthand for "40 days and 40 nights," the mythical length of time he'd stay up to work on a project.) He's dressed in a white-and-blue T-shirt from a recent OVO collection, and the hem of his light blue jeans spills over a pair of white-and-gold OVO Jordan 10s, produced with Jordan Brand as part of its first endorsement of someone who isn't an athlete.

Later, perched on a chair behind his boards, 40 points to an elevated part of the studio where a cushioned bench lines the wall. "I sit here," he says. "Drake sits there. We work." The two have been at each other's sides for seven years—"for some reason, the way Noah hears things is the way I hear it," Drake told The FADER in 2011. "We have a creative relationship," 40 says. "We go into the studio and we make music together, and that's the most important thing to me. I protect that with my life."

40's instinctual understanding of Drake's nuances, and the technical know-how he learned as an intern of legendary engineer Noel "Gadget" Campbell, have been instrumental to Drake's success. With S.O.T.A., 40 now aspires to also become "an ultimate resource" for PARTYNEXTDOOR, Roy Wood$, Majid Jordan, and the other artists on OVO Sound's growing roster who'll use the studio as a clubhouse. "I'm able to help them with their process and how they're recording, or with toys and instruments and machines that they didn't maybe know about," he says. "I can expose them to knowl-



edge. I pride myself on my skill sets. I care about this stuff. I built this massive place, right?"

The skilled community that will work at S.O.T.A. is a living rebuttal to the old idea that being from Toronto ruined your chances of global music industry success. "The conversation when I was a kid was, 'Will anyone ever do it?' The conversation now is, 'Who's next?'" 40 says. "Someone else is gonna come through a door [that Drake opened], but I don't know if someone else will ever make a difference like that. We did the heavy lifting. No one else has to come do that heavy lifting again. It's been done."

Within OVO, Drake is the leader—the boy, as they all call him, to rally around. And sitting on his proverbial shoulders, yelling in each ear, are 40 and Oliver El-Khatib, Drake's manager, longtime creative confidante, and friend. "Truth be told, Drake's career has always been the three of us knocking our heads off a table, trying to figure everything out," 40 says. "That's the power of OVO."

Oliver and 40 were close before either met Drake. They became friends in grade 9 homeroom and were members of a DJ collective called the Lebanon Dons. From 2008 to 2009, they were roommates, living in a condo along Toronto's lakeside. Oliver worked for a retailer that owned three menswear boutiques, and 40 eked out a living at an arts nonprofit while engineering on the side. 40 heard Drake's Boi-1da-produced "Do What U Do" on the radio and wondered who the boy with the new flow was; around the same time, Drake was looking for 40, an engineer with a budding reputation, to help him record a follow-up project. "I was hunting for him, he was looking for me," 40 says. The two only met, though, after Oliver passed 40 Drake's number and nudged them together when they found themselves in the same room: "It was Oliver who gave me the kick in the ass I needed," says 40.

Today, Oliver helps manage Drake's career and oversees the growth of OVO's clothing line. Leadership comes from others too—Drake's longtime DJ-turned-co-manager Future the Prince, and Majid Jordan's manager Drex Jancar, for instance—but 40 and Oliver, 40 says, create "balance" in OVO, helping the team cover necessary ground by piloting divergent initiatives. 40 makes sure the songs sound like they should, and Oliver looks after everything else—or, as 40 puts it: "the brand, where we're going, the feeling, the vibe."

Sitting at a marble dining table in his Toronto apartment, not far from where he grew up, Oliver defines himself as a "worker, not an artist." He connects dots, curates the moodboard. Back in 2008, it was Oliver that suggested the Tears for Fears sample and that helped give Drake's breakthrough 2009 mixtape, *So Far Gone*, its off-kilter, pastiche texture. "The joy of my life is making music with those two guys," he explains. "I don't physically play an instrument or produce



records. The charm of what I bring to the table is that sometimes it's just ideas."

Early on, Oliver's impact was most visible on OVO's blogspot, where he began to stitch together an identity for the company under the alias Olivier the Parisian Gangster. The blog's first post was published in April of 2008—a photo of Oliver wearing a distressed Canadian tuxedo, a cigarette dangling from his lips, along with this short mission statement: "Thank you, Thank you. This note will be consisting of things that I personally co-sign and or find of interest. Please enjoy and feel free to comment. Peace, O."

The site gathered fashion photos he liked, plugged the stores he worked at, and shared music he and the crew deemed important. If it was cool, it would get love. Seven years later, Oliver is a widely recognized curator. His ear drives OVO's biweekly show on Apple Music's global streaming network, Beats 1, which has premiered new Drake and Majid Jordan songs since its launch in June. The show has also promoted a new crop of Toronto artists—young rapper Safe, and spoken-word artist Mustafa the Poet—as well as little-known British



rappers like Nines and Section Boyz. This is a meritocracy, like the blog before it, where anyone can earn a look. "There is no nepotism or favoritism in that radio show or anything we do," Oliver says.

These days, Oliver's main project is OVO's fashion line. OVO collaborated with brands like Canada Goose and Roots Canada on designs for high-end coats and jackets in 2011, the same year they sold their first in-house product: T-shirts featuring the owl logo. Now, the company is producing a wider line: hats, graphic tees, and sweatshirts, but also towels, tracksuits, tote bags, and, more recently, cut-and-sew button-ups. Product drops follow their own schedule, with limited runs of new designs arriving every month or two. "I'm really proud of where the brand is at today," says Oliver. "The clothing business is a tough business to go into and have success. It's something that takes a long time, and it's an immense amount of work—you're working 16, 18 months out."

As they take on the logistics of making clothes, Oliver emphasizes that OVO remains a "mom-and-pop" operation, owned by itself. "If there is any idea that this is some massive corporate entity that's worth billions of dollars, then that's a misconception," he says, laughing. "There's a few of us putting our blood, sweat, and tears into this 24/7. It's a lifestyle. It's not a job that we all go home from. It's something that we've put our own time and money and equity into, and we're building it with hammers and nails."

OVO products are sold through a minimalist e-shop and at a meticulous brick-and-mortar store in Little Portugal, a slowly gentrifying strip of quickly gentrifying Toronto. "This seemed like a place that was going to be sustainable for us," Oliver says of the store's location. "We're a destination, so it wasn't going to matter if we were in a central or upscale area." A year after its doors opened, it's not unusual to see kids lined up outside to cop new hats or just catch a glimpse of OVO crew members through the glass storefront. Oliver calls the shop OVO's "tangible access point" and says he's "100 percent" involved with its design and staffing. "Who's working in the store? What music is playing in the store? What's the vibe in the store? What's the temperament in the store? That's a complete extension of our brand. It's very, very important for people to be able to go there and see what it is," he says.

The shop is an exercise in clever marketing and offers an additional income stream—hats are priced at $45 CAD and a full tracksuit can run you as much as $300—but it's also a symbol of OVO's devotion to Toronto and their desire to change the city's cultural landscape. Growing up, Oliver says he "never really saw a clear path" for himself in school, and struggled to find mentorship or entry points into Canada's limited creative industries. Now that he's made himself successful in a creative role that bridges music and fashion, he sees the store as a way to celebrate kids like his younger self, who have "incredible work ethic, incredible ideas, and an incredible amount of passion." He envisions the space as a place where creatives can "come together and meet other people like them," and where eventually those meetings will result in "something new."

Ten years ago, Oliver might have left Toronto for New York, L.A., or London to find work and build a life. Today, OVO's example has arguably made it more appealing for young people to stay put, and the store is a symbol of possibility and pride. "We're from a city where I'm not sure if we've fully embraced our identity as creative people yet," Oliver says. "If there's anything that we want to put forth, it's just to have some patriotism for what we're doing here and to look within for talent and for inspiration." This vision has earned him fans of his own; in a YouTube video scrutinizing OVO's Spring 2015 products, a young reviewer says, "Oliver, I look up to him so much. More than I look up to Drake, honestly."

For years, Drake, 40, and Oliver's stated goal has been to make the city proud. And now that together they've sold millions of records and built an undeniable brand, the city

is proud—rallying behind the Raptors (Drake serves as the NBA team's global ambassador) and calling itself The 6 (a nickname popularized by Drake in the past year, drawn from Toronto's 416 and 647 area codes). The annual OVO Fest now features an educational seminar (OVO Summit) and a community basketball championship (OVO Bounce), events that tease the kind of programming OVO might support in Toronto down the line. But to expand their offerings, Drake must continue to thrive—if he crumbles, everything could crumble with him. "Drake has to stay touring and keep the machine running so that we can help the city. I want to start setting up more speaking engagements, community programs with music programming," 40 explains. "If he just stops everything he's doing, what happens next?"

Asked about his vision for OVO's future, Oliver is reluctant to pin down the company's next moves, perhaps aware that as OVO grows bigger, its reputation will be harder than ever to have charge of. The music industry is volatile, audiences are fickle, and no amount of talent can guarantee buzz. For a company like theirs, the key to long-term success is both simpler and more elusive than opening more stores or breaking sales records: as one trend gives way to the next, they always need to stay relevant. "I'm proud of the work that the team has done and I'm a part of that. I'm proud, but there's no time to celebrate," he says. "I live my life by letting the work do the talking," he says. "I do my very best. It's good to have goals, but sometimes the goals are just for yourself. They don't need to be shared. All you can do is focus on what's within your control."

As they're beginning to put in work on *Views*, the crew appears cautiously anxious. Drake has sustained an incredible run, producing hit songs and cultural flashpoints with seeming effortlessness, helping OVO flourish as a result. Now, together, they're finding out how long a person can do this for. "That's where the challenges start to lie—'Well, can you do it again? Can you do it again on demand? Can you do it again on demand after that?' That's what separates the greats, is when you're able to step up time and time again, and deliver," 40 explains.

OVO will approach *Views* in much the same way as they've approached projects since their earliest days, Oliver says. For Drake, 40, and Oliver, that means holing up in the studio, knocking their heads together, and only stopping when it's good. "We're just really getting back to basics and not giving ourselves any sense of deadline," Oliver says. "Just letting it happen naturally. That's how we've always done it. When it's done, it's done. If we love it, we love it." He steers Drake's career and the calculated strategy behind it, but true to OVO's foundation, prefers to hear good music than to worry about how to sell it. "We're committed to doing work," he says. "What manifests from that is just as exciting to me as it is to you, or anybody—any fan of music."



Hard to Kill

RADRIC DAVIS is only 35 years old, with 9 lives behind him. Here, 20 associates tell the story of how GUCCI MANE rose, fell, and rose again.

Story by Benjamin Meadows-Ingram
Photography by Irina Rozovsky and Diwang Valdez
Additional reporting by Neil Martinez-Belkin


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Love him or hate him, one thing's for damn sure: there's no denying Gucci Mane. Born in the outskirts of Birmingham but made in the streets of Atlanta, the marble-mouthed MC with the snot-nosed flow has spent the better part of the past 15 years overcoming just about every obstacle thrown his way—including many of his own making. His realness is of fantasy proportions. He has released more mixtapes than anybody, got in more trouble with the law than anybody, spun off more protégés, recorded more regional hits.

When I first caught up with him for a 15-minute phone interview in the spring of 2009, Gucci was fresh out of Fulton County Jail and riding a wave of excitement into what would prove to be the best summer of his career. A year or so later, I went to Los Angeles to shadow him during BET Awards weekend for a feature slated to run in *SPIN*. Those days were strange—Gucci spent a lot of time standing around the lobby of the W Hotel in West Hollywood, surveying the scene and not saying much. Late one night, he invited me to join him and a young woman he'd just met for an intimate conversation at a small lounge table that felt better suited for two. We hustled in and out of a Hollywood nightclub with Suge Knight and hit the studio with Pharrell. Gucci visited the BET Awards gifting suites, but skipped the actual award show, hanging with the folks in the lobby instead.

I remember being struck by how closed off and guarded he was generally, and how dramatically he came to life when we were in the studio and there was music to be made. In L.A., our proper interview never materialized. Later, when we finally talked over the phone, the conversation was brief. Gucci dodged or shut down anything too personal; he abruptly ended the call when I started fishing, looking for anything to open him up. In the days that followed, he failed to show up to the photo shoot for the story, which *SPIN* ultimately scrapped for the print edition and published online instead.

When his next album flopped and news came that he'd been arrested again, I figured that was it. I thought he'd blown all of his shots and wasn't destined to be one of the greats—that the Gucci Mane era was done. I should have known better.

He hadn't accepted defeat before, so why would he then? In fact, Gucci's whole career refutes the idea that artists are either winners or losers. The lane he carved was all his own, and wide enough not just for himself, but a slew of other MCs, DJs, and producers in what would grow to be one of music's most electric and enduring scenes.

Since, Gucci has continued to release music at an astonishing clip. His story has become a saga, touching artists and executives across generations and fans around the world. Yet even as his life has played out in public, much about Gucci Mane has remained a mystery, clouded by speculation and myth. In the following pages, 20 of his collaborators tell their stories, together drawing a portrait of a complicated man with a strong creative drive who has a good shot of being remembered as the hardest working MC since Tupac and the best A&R in Atlanta, if not the best A&R that hip-hop has ever seen. Spanning more than a decade, even this is an incomplete picture: emails to several key players went unanswered, and still more declined to talk. Gucci Mane also chose not to participate.

Today, he sits in the United States Penitentiary, in Terre Haute, Indiana, two years into a three-year sentence for possession of a firearm by a convicted felon. According to the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, speaking from the bench at the sentencing hearing, U.S. District Judge Steve Jones told Gucci Mane, then 34, "You're a young man. You have a full life ahead of you... [but if you continue to break the law] you're going to wake up one morning broke. You're going to wake up one morning back to prison." Judge Jones then reportedly added, "I don't mean any disrespect, but according to young people, my nieces and nephews, you are quite cool."

Gucci Mane is born Radric Davis on February 12, 1980, in Bessemer, Alabama, a former coal town turned southwest Birmingham suburb. In the fourth grade, he moves to East Atlanta with his mom and older brother.

OJ Da Juiceman (rapper): [Our relationship] dates back to maybe late '80s, early '90s. We was living right across the avenue [from him] in [some] East Atlanta apartments called Mountain Park. This is back around the time when Nintendo cartridges was out. We became friends, trading Nintendo cartridges. We moved up the street, to the Sun Valley apartments on Bouldercrest. I think it was '94, '95. We used to go around to apartments and knock on the door and ask if we can take the trash out and whatnot to get us a dollar. You know how apartments have generators, like with a little green box on them? I remember sitting on the generator eating snacks, just beating on the generator. We called it "the green machine." We used to beat on the green machine and we both started freestyling, rapping, thinking we had talent. We were just talking about a bunch of miscellaneous stuff.



Ashford East Village apartments, formerly called Sun Valley, where Gucci Mane and OJ Da Juiceman started rapping together in the '90s.

PHOTOGRAPHY DIWANG VALDEZ (PREVIOUS SPREAD). IRINA ROZOVSKY FOR THE FADER (THIS PAGE).

Zaytoven (producer): Me and Gucci met in my mother's basement. Maybe 2000, 2001. At the time I was going to barber college because I wanted to cut hair. I had a studio in my mom and dad's house, so me and a couple of guys were going to record after class or whatever. Gucci was a friend of my buddy, and [my buddy] brought him there. Gucci wasn't really that into music, but he had a nephew that he was trying to help get into music. He was going to pay me to make a beat for his nephew. The song was called "Lil Buddy." So I made the beat for his little nephew and Gucci was rapping, teaching him how to do the song. I don't know what it was, but I felt something special about Gucci at the time—the way he was helping his nephew out. We exchanged numbers, and then it turned into Gucci coming over to rap rather than his nephew. That's how we got started. We were doing it for the fun of it. We were enjoying making beats. I thought he was a dope writer. He was so simple with saying all the right things and putting all the right words together. It became a working relationship from there. Me and Gucci had a chemistry. Wherever he went or whoever he teamed up with, I was rocking with him.

Burn One (DJ and producer): [In 2004] the Dem Franchize Boyz "White Tee" record was out, and there was a group that had [done a song] called "Black Tee," like the response record. I called up the record label [that released "Black Tee"], so I could go by there and check out some music. I showed up and [Gucci Mane] was the only guy there. There's like nine people on the original song—he was the only one that showed up.

Kevin "Coach K" Lee (co-founder of Quality Control Music, manager of Gucci Mane from 2009-2013, former manager of Young Jeezy): I met Gooch early, man. I was looking for him. He had this record called "Fork in the Pot," and that shit was jamming, so I put it out there that I was looking for him. One day I was walking in Walter's, this famous sneaker store in Atlanta, and he walked up on me and was like, "Yo, I'm Gucci Mane. I'm who you've been looking for." About a week later, we were in the studio cutting "Icy."

Zaytoven: I was at the barbershop and Gucci called me, like, "Hey, man, Young Jeezy wants to do a song with us." I didn't really know who Young Jeezy was, but I'm like, "Cool, I'm gonna leave the barbershop, I'm gonna make a beat, and we'll go down there and do it." Everything we did was coming from scratch, right off the muscle. We didn't have stuff already pre-prepared or none of that. Gucci was just like, "I got the hook I want you to make the beat around." He sung the hook, I made the beat, and we went down [to Patchwerk Studios].

Kori Anders (engineer): I was an intern [at Patchwerk], sitting in on that Jeezy session [for "Icy"]. Back then, Gucci was this happy-go-lucky kid that was just happy to have his foot in the door at a studio. Gucci and Jeezy were both on the come-up. I know a lot of other cities, every studio session is pretty isolated, people don't really intermingle. But in Atlanta, everyone kinda knew everyone. It's just a big melting pot.

Zaytoven: I was from California, so all of these other guys are new to me. That [session] was my first time meeting them. Gucci was bragging on me the whole time like, "Yeah, this is Zaytoven, he the best at this, he do this and that!" He's putting it on real thick. I'm from the Bay Area so my music sounds a little different. But to Gucci, everything I did was the world. He loved everything I did. But when he played the song [for Jeezy and his guys], wasn't nobody really feeling it. So Gucci was like, "Alright, Zay, pull up another one." But I'm almost mad. I'm stubborn, like, "Well, nah, I ain't about to pull up no other beat. This is the song that you done did all this bragging about." Jeezy was saying he wanted to do something a little bit more street, but this is what we came up with. Me and Gucci do our stuff, it's got flavor to it. It's fun. It's still hardcore music, it just has a frillier melody. It has a little brightness.

Coach K: They start working on another record. But Gucci kept singing this damn hook. He was singing the hook to everybody. Eventually, I pull Jeezy, and I'm like, "Yo, man, this shit may be kinda dope. It's got a melody. He keeps singing the shit.

We need to go ahead and cut this record." So they went in and cut the record.

Zaytoven: Before you know it, it's like everybody in the whole studio, people that ain't got nothing to do with the song, they had a pen trying to write a verse to it. Lil' Will was in there, Gucci had him sing the chorus for us.

Burn One: Gucci played me "Icy" a couple of months before it came out [in 2005], and I hated it because of the Auto-Tune on Lil' Will. Gucci was so excited he put Auto-Tune on Lil' Will from the Dungeon Family, but to me that was like blasphemy. I'm like, "How could you do that to him?" Three months later, it blew up.

Zaytoven: ["Icy"] was perfect. You've got Young Jeezy, the hottest guy in the streets. Then you've got Gucci Mane, who's like an underground guy who's trying to get on. Both of these guys need the song real bad. Jeezy didn't even want the song, but he needed it. He had the streets on lock, he just didn't have a song that defined "Jeezy got the hottest song out," or, "Have you heard the new guy, Jeezy, on the radio?" He didn't have one of them. So "Icy" was that. And for a guy like Gucci Mane, it was like, "This is my only shot. This is my only shot in the game so I'm not fixing to give this up to nobody." "Icy" sounded like a Jeezy single because he's rapping on the first verse, talking about jewelry—and him and the people he was with was always in the fancy cars, with all the jewelry, popping all the bottles—so it almost fit him. It just wasn't his song. It was Gucci Mane's song. So it started turning sour real quick.

Greg Street (DJ, radio personality, and early Gucci Mane manager): When the beef came about with Gucci and Jeezy, I stepped away. I didn't want to be a part of that. [Jeezy's label] Def Jam was trying to convince Jeezy to see if he could get ["Icy"]. Def Jam wanted the record to launch Jeezy's career. But at the time, Gucci's whole thing was, "Jeezy's trying to take my record." I was trying to make Gucci understand that it can be beneficial to you, too, in some circumstances, to let the signed person have the record. Because it's still going to be your record regardless of who puts it out! And if it happens—if it blows up—sky's the limit for what you can ask for in a deal. But he didn't really understand that as a new artist. That's how the whole beef started.



Walter's Clothing, where longtime manager Kevin "Coach K" Lee met Gucci Mane for the first time.

Zaytoven: I had never had a hit record before. I had never had a song on the radio. I'd never had a song played in the club before, really. So when I was going out to 112 or Velvet Room, and the DJ would cut the music off and everybody was singing the lyrics to "Icy," I was like, "Wait a minute." I can't even really describe the feeling. It was everybody's favorite song, it was the song of the summer. Gucci knew, "If I hold this song for myself, everybody know this Gucci's song. I got the hottest song of the year." By the time it made it to radio, I didn't even want to hear it no more.

Greg Street: It never really should have turned into a beef. It could have been from the start a beautiful situation for both parties—and it did turn into a beautiful situation for both parties anyway because the record is a classic. But it also just escalated and never turned back. Most of these beefs in hip-hop could be solved with two grown men sitting down and having a conversation.

DJ Drama (DJ, radio personality, and founder of the *Gangsta Grillz* mixtape series): Me and Gucci probably met sometime after he did "Black Tee." During that era, we were cool. When him and Jeezy fell out, it put me in a tough spot for us to work together.

Todd Moscowitz (co-founder of 300 Entertainment and veteran music executive, who signed Gucci Mane while president of Asylum Records in 2007): After "Black Tee" and "Icy," Gucci came up to New York with Jacob York and we had a meeting. I had a pretty big office. I was sitting at my desk, and Gucci chose the chair that was the farthest away. I just remember him sitting there with these giant sunglasses on, and I don't remember him taking them off. He said very little and he listened a lot and he didn't give up anything. I was basically begging him to sign with us. I was giving him a very hard pitch because I was such a huge fan and I was so passionate about it. His facial expression—I don't think it changed once during the meeting. Then he left, and ended up signing with Big Cat right after that, and started working on *Trap House.*

Zaytoven: We were doing records that just ended up blowing up. Big Cat had re-

PHOTOGRAPHY IRINA ROZOVSKY FOR THE FADER.

lationships with how he do the radio and all of that, so he could help us in certain ways. That's how Big Cat came into play.

On May 10, 2005, five men attack Gucci Mane while he visits a friend at her house in Decatur, Georgia. The men tie his friend up, pistol whip him and threaten to kill him. During the confrontation, Gucci somehow gets his hands on a gun, letting off several shots as the men retreat. Two days later, the body of Henry Clark III, an aspiring rapper from Macon, Georgia, is found dead. On May 19, just days before the release of his debut album, *Trap House*, Gucci Mane turns himself in to DeKalb County police to face murder charges in Clark's death. On the day the album is released, he posts a $100,000 bond but returns to jail a few months later after pleading no contest to a separate assault charge stemming from an incident in which he beat a club promoter with a pool stick. While serving the six-month sentence for this assault, the charges are dropped in his murder case due to insufficient evidence. The terms of his probation in relation to that assault case will dog him for years to come.

Zaytoven: I was in California [at the time of the shooting]. I didn't even really believe it. And then I seen him on *Rap City*, and I could tell it was something serious. I could just tell in his whole demeanor. When I got back it was like, "Damn, Gucci Mane's sitting down for six months. He on a murder charge." For real?

Drumma Boy (producer): When we are tested, we see what we're made of. And when Gucci got in that situation where people tried to kill him, he had no choice but to defend himself, and he got charged with murder.

Greg Street: You gotta think, they ran up on him. He didn't even have a gun. He was just at the girl's house [and was] able to take the other guy's gun. [But] I guess, when something like that happens, everyone wants to label you as being a "tough guy."

OJ Da Juiceman: I was doing a prison term when Gucci dropped *Trap House* [on Big Cat, in May 2005]. My mom and my sister came and got me from the prison. My sister bought the CD for me and showed me Gucci had started rapping. I'm like, "Oooh, wow! My boy done made it!" From then on, I thought if he made it, I could try to make it too.

Zaytoven: Nobody else in Atlanta wanted to work with me because it's like Gucci Mane is the bad guy now in the city. Don't nobody rock with him because everybody likes Jeezy or T.I. They are all with each other, or friends. Me and Gucci are guys that just came out the basement. Gucci got a murder case. I don't know what's going to happen [with Gucci's case], but I know we got a lot of music. So I was like, "Well, I'll take our music and put it out." I was trying to brand myself, so I put me and Gucci Mane's pictures on the cover and started putting all our music out. And people started really rocking with it. That has been our formula ever since.

Burn One: When he came out [of jail, in January 2006], I saw him over at Zaytoven's. I was like, "Let's do a tape." He was like, "Nah, I got to do this album with Big Cat." Within a month and a half, their relationship had soured. So he hit me like, "Yo, I'm ready to go." He had a bunch of music recorded. Sporadically, over a month, we did a bunch of sessions. One night we went to a strip club and then came back to my studio at like 3:00 a.m. and recorded until 7:00. I would pull up a beat—I've never seen this—and he would go from top to bottom. He would be in the booth, did not want me to play a beat before he went in there, and from top to bottom would freestyle the whole song. Five minutes, three minutes, however long the beat was played for. Then as soon as the beat went off, he was like, "Alright, pull up another one." He did 10 songs like that, not messing up once. The coldest freestyles. Gucci would just go and go.

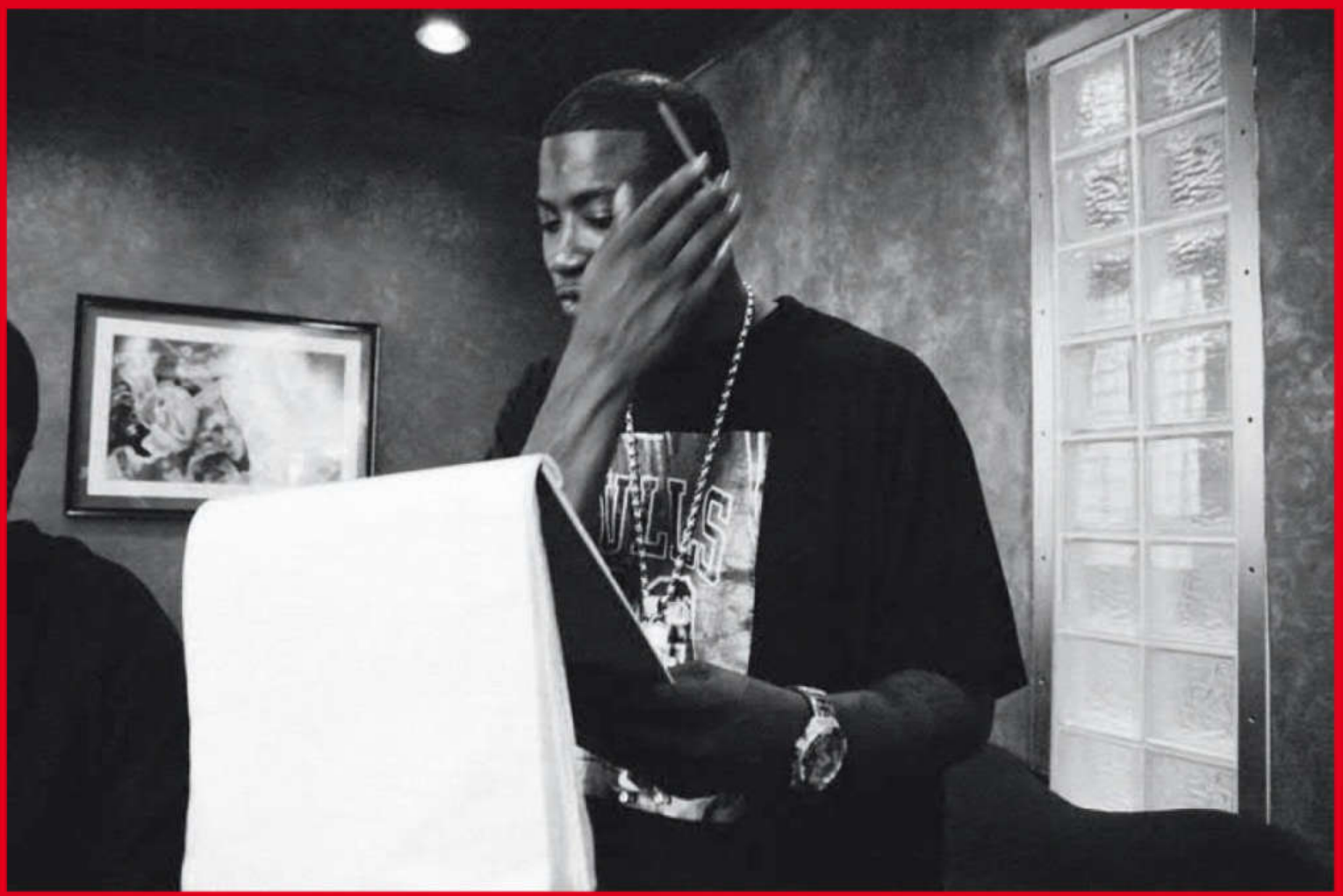
Kori Anders: His mind works extremely fast. It got to the point where it wasn't uncommon for us to record six or seven songs in an evening. I guess he liked the speed at which I worked because I was able to keep a faster pace than what he was used to [from] other engineers.

Greg Street: He makes records like Tupac. He makes records like Cash Money. He lives in the studio. That's all he do.

Kori Anders: I grew up an avid Pac fan, and I came up under Leslie Brathwaite, who's been engineering [for years] and telling me stories about Pac and how his work ethic was relentless. When I got in with Gucci, I wasn't the biggest fan of Gucci's music, but I'm a huge fan of his work ethic. And I drew parallels to the way he worked to how I heard Pac worked back in the day. I would wake up in the morning and I'd get a call from Patchwerk, like, "Gucci's here, he's ready to work." A producer would start playing a beat, and five seconds later he'd be like, "Stop. I'm ready to go in." Eight hours later, five songs completed. That was a typical day for years with Gucci. And the sessions would be crazy. There would be 30-40 people there, but his ability to focus and tune out all of the background noise was just amazing to me.

Drumma Boy: The myths I've heard of Tupac, I think of Gucci instantly. I think Gucci would be rapping on the corner or on the block, entertaining the hood, whether he's famous or not.

Mike WiLL Made-It (producer and founder of Eardrummer Records): We met when I was going down to Patchwerk with my boy who was working there at the time. He was like, "Man, Gucci's upstairs recording," and I'm like, "Damn, for real?" So I went upstairs and I ran into him in the hallway and I was like, "Hey, bro, I been making beats." He took the beats and went into the lounge and was just in there freestyling on my beats. I was waiting outside the room and I heard him rapping through the wall. This is like 2005. He came out and was like, "Man, I fuck with these beats, bruh. Ain't you the one that made the beats?" He was like, "Come listen to this shit right quick," and he had wrote something to one of the beats and he was trying to buy it from me right there. I ain't really know what to say because I was just selling beats for like $100 or $200 at the time. I don't know how the business works with these rappers that's on and shit. He had offered



“I would wake up in the morning and get a call from the studio, like, ‘Gucci’s here, he’s ready to work.’ A producer would start playing a beat, and five seconds later he’d be like, ‘Stop. I’m ready to go in.’ Eight hours later, five songs completed. That was a typical day for years with Gucci. And the sessions would be crazy. There would be 30–40 people there, but his ability to focus and tune out all of the background noise was just amazing.”

Kori Anders

me $1,000 and I was like, "Man, holler at my people and shit." He could tell I ain't have any people. But he got my number and stayed up on me.

Burn One: [In 2006] Gucci put out "My Chain" and thought that was gonna be [a hit]. That didn't work. At the time, he was ice cold. I vividly remember as soon as I got the CDs pressed up for [the October 2006 tape] *Chicken Talk*, we went to the Old National Flea Market, the discount mall. We pulled up and I left [Gucci] in the car and walked in with these CDs. I was trying to sell them to a guy in the store, and he was like, "Man, nobody is gonna buy these Gucci Mane CDs. Nobody care about him." He was going on and on about how Gucci wasn't going to come back. So I literally just walked right outside and I put the music on in my car. Gucci was there, and we just started talking to people in the parking lot, playing the album—just booming CDs out of the parking lot, selling, selling, selling, selling. Twenty minutes later the guy comes outside, like, "Man, let me get 40 of those."

Zaytoven: People [started] really gravitating to him, like, "Oh, Gucci Mane is the truth."

DJ Drama: He was creative, and he was so Southern, so country, so hood. I think he just touched people. In a parallel way from how Jeezy did, almost. As different as they are, they're similar in the way they touched the hood so strong. Their words, their wordplay, the content, and the subject matter—it created something that was very entertaining and was also something that people could feel. Gucci had a lot of character and personality in his raps. He was a character and a personality on his own.



Old National Flea Market, where Burn One sold Gucci Mane mixtapes in the parking lot.

PHOTOGRAPHY DIWANG VALDEZ (LEFT). IRINA ROZOVSKY FOR THE FADER (RIGHT).

Greg Street: He had all these records that were crazy big. He had "Pillz," he had "Trap House." You go in the club, and you can hear the DJ actually play 10 Gucci Mane songs in the course of a night, and some of those songs, you might hear them twice.

DJ Drama: "Freaky Gurl," "Trap House," "Vette Pass By," "Kitchen"—those are the records, still to this day. When I play those in the club, it goes crazy. [But] "Freaky Gurl," that's when Gucci Mane really started.

Zaytoven: I think we did "Freaky Gurl" the same day we did "Pillz." We recorded like seven songs that day. Shawty Lo had come over [and] a few [other] guys came through, but they didn't get on the song. And we just recording, ain't thinking nothing of it. It's just like, "Damn, that does sound good. What time you coming over tomorrow? Let's go crazy tomorrow."

Burn One: Gucci had like this childlike wonderment with his music. This enthusiasm and energy. Just giddy. When he would write a line that he thought was clever or something he would just start laughing, like a little kid if they just cracked a little joke or something, you know? He got off on his own stuff. Not in an egotistical way, but like, "Man, that was cool. Look at what I did with that right there," or whatever. He was amused by himself. He would say stuff to get a rise out of himself and other people. I was inspired just seeing his inspiration in it.

Zaytoven: [We're still] doing music, but now he really doing shows. He's moving around. Now the majors want to sign him. He too hot. That's when I think he did end up doing the situation with [Warner].

Todd Moscowitz: In 2007, we finally decided to get in business and signed a deal. I can't remember exactly how it happened—he was having some issues with Big Cat. As I remember it, we ended up doing a deal to buy him out of Big Cat and sign him. We spent a lot of time working out the logistics of separating [from Big Cat] and working out something with Cat as well. The first meeting, [Gucci] gave up nothing, but when we linked up again, he was so much more real and open. I got to see who he was a little bit. He was incredibly bright, but also incredibly transparent about where he was at with things. If something bothered him, he would say it. If something made him feel a certain way, he would say it. He would put everything out on the table. That was not something you see a lot, truthfully, in rap music. Everybody's very, "This is what I think people wanna hear," and, "This is what I think people wanna think of me." Gucci didn't care—does not care—in any way how people look at him.

In 2006 Gucci Mane meets Debra Antney, a music industry vet from Queens, New York, and the founder of Mizay Entertainment. Big Cat had brought her in to help Gucci fulfill the 600 hours of community service required by the terms of his probation in the 2005 assault case. From 2007 to 2009, she is Gucci's manager and business partner. Her son, who Gucci would nickname Waka Flocka Flame, would become one of Gucci's closest friends and associates. Together, he and Gucci would form So Icey Entertainment as a subsidiary of Asylum Records. Years later, So Icey would fold into a new venture, 1017 Brick Squad Records, under Atlantic Records.

Todd Moscowitz: The first thing that happened was that things got bumpy between him and Cat. For the first six months [of the deal], managing through that process was a big part of what we spent our time on. [In 2007], I think Cat was releasing *Trap-A-Thon* at the same time we were releasing *Back to the Trap House*. There was a whole lot of energy around Cat trying to drop the album right on top of Gucci's album. Cat was trying to put "Freaky Gurl" on his album and we were trying to put "Freaky Gurl" on ours. It was a big tug of war that eventually got resolved. The first album was not a smooth process. Between what we were trying to do and what [Cat] was trying to do, it just got really confus-

ing. I think it took everybody kind of off their game a bit. Consequently, I think *Back to the Trap House* underperformed.

Zaytoven: To me, [*Back to the Trap House*] took the dirt off of everything. It took the edge off. It wasn't recorded the same. It's all high-end recording. It wasn't what we created. Now, we're trying to put a commercial album out. Now, we trying to be like the rest of the rappers in the game. I'm like, Well, dang, maybe this is going to [take us to] the next level, so I'm gonna play my part. But it didn't touch me like I thought it should.

Todd Moscowitz: Gucci's got a million thoughts and ideas on every aspect of what's going on. He really was making the music on his own, and he's the most prolific artist that I've ever worked with. He might be the most prolific artist that anybody's ever worked with. The volume of music that he makes is hard to keep up with. I've been closely associated with him for probably 10 years now—and I can't keep track. [So] he was making the music, but there was new music every day. He'd be like, "I got this other record. I got this other record. And I wanna do this. And I wanna do that." Coming off that album, he basically went on a fucking spree of putting out mixtapes. It was a huge run.

DJ Holiday (DJ and radio personality on Atlanta's Streetz 94.5): I was just a little, young DJ trying to find my way, looking for that next step to put myself in a better category where I could make real money off this and pay my bills. Gucci used to come [to Zaytoven's mom's house] every so often. I was like, "Yo, that's Gucci Mane?" And [Zaytoven] was like, "Yeah, but he really don't talk to people." So I was like, "Well, I'm a fly on the wall. I ain't gonna say nothing too much to him other than what I wanted to say." Zaytoven was helping me develop my mixtape brand, giving me throwaways—songs that artists recorded at his studio and then didn't use.

OJ Da Juiceman: Gucci asked if I could go on the road. I'm like, "Shit, boy, I can't wait!" I'd never left Atlanta. I wanted to try some of this stuff too. He won't say that I was his hype man, but I was his hype man. I knew every word because we were boys and I liked his music. So I would hype-man his music on the road, but at the same time I was pressing up my own CDs. I started taking 2,500 CDs to each show. Before he would perform, I would pass out some CDs [and then] save some so that when we got on stage, I could pass out more CDs. He'd seen the fact that I was going hard like he was, hyping him like his music was my own music. So he kept me on the road a little more.

Zaytoven: OJ [and] all these young little other guys was coming up—Yung LA, and Yung Ralph, and other guys in the city like Gorilla Zoe. Those guys [were] ready for their shot. If [me and Gucci were] doing ten songs a day, Gucci ain't gotta do every verse on every song. We'd get some different flavor from different people. So I'd use Gucci Mane as the big dog, like, "You all do some work with me, I'll probably get Gucci to do a song with y'all." Gucci Mane [would] come in and do some records with these guys and give them a stamp and it's like, "Okay, OJ the next hot guy." And I was surprised, like, "Dang, OJ on fire right now!" ["Make the Trap Say Aye"] wasn't originally OJ's song at first. He was just [going to be] featured on there.

OJ Da Juiceman: We made "Make the Trap Say Aye" in the studio at Zaytoven's mother's house. When I seen Gucci didn't want the beat, I looked at Zay, tapped him like, "Put that to the side for me." Once Gucci was done with his session, I asked Zay, "Can I record that song?" And Zay's like, "Hell, yeah, you know it's all good." I had already had a hook—*Quarter brick, half a brick...*

Zaytoven: Later on, OJ came in like, "Aye, bruh, this my single right here." And we're like, "Alright, take the files and get it mixed." But he ain't even get it mixed. It was just playing the way it came out the basement. And it's like, "Oh, dang, this song blowed up for real?"

OJ Da Juiceman: I'd say I worked on that song two and a half years before it blew up.

Zaytoven: That's when my mama's house started getting so full of everybody trying to buy beats. "Make the Trap Say Aye" really solidified me, as in, "Okay, it's a certain sound that this producer has that don't nobody else got." That's when my sound really started becoming what it is. The way that the drums are, and that dirty, kind of trappy sound—I feel like it's the most mimicked sound in the rap industry even right now. I know for the South it is. I'm still making them same beats over and over again today, and people are still coming to buy them because they feel like "I've got to have this."

Kori Anders: Seeing the amount of success that a lot of people around Gucci have, it's almost like he saw things first. I recorded Yo Gotti before I even knew who he was. Gotti showed up and Gucci's like, "He's gonna go in and rap." Gucci had a knack for knowing, "I see something in that guy and he's going to be special."

DJ Holiday: Every person I grew up with called me the day [my 2008 mixtape with Gucci Mane] *EA Sportscenter* dropped, like "Holy shit, dawg, you made it." I was just happy the shit actually came out because up until the day I recorded myself talking shit over the tape, I still didn't know if Gucci was gonna use it or not. It was a long, grueling process, but it worked out. The same store that wouldn't take my CDs [before], motherfuckers [were] asking, "Can I get a print-up of two or three thousand copies?" I felt like, "Damn, this Gucci Mane dude really got my shit going crazy!" After that, it was the phenomenon of just dropping.



Patchwerk Studios.

PHOTOGRAPHY IRINA ROZOVSKY FOR THE FADER.

Todd Moscowitz: He put out *Sportscenter* and *Gucci Sosa* and *Mr. Perfect* and *Bird Flu 2* and all this stuff. That went on for a year and change, to where I wasn't sure when I was getting an album. He just kept putting music out.

Kori Anders: He picked that up from Lil Wayne. He'd look at Wayne when [Wayne] went on that whole rampage of dropping tape after tape after tape, and he saw the success he was having. I remember him saying, "I can do that. I can record as much as Wayne. I can put out just as much music as him."

Mike WiLL Made-It: We fell out of contact [after that first meeting at Patchwerk], and then me and Waka [Flocka Flame] met each other on another note. So Waka put me on the phone with Gucci, and we kind of clicked. I had just gotten out of high school. I'd take my mom's car, drop her off at work in the morning, and use her car to go to the studio to be with Gucci all day. We did [the November 2007 mixtape] *No Pad, No Pencil*—he rapped on 20 beats in three days, all freestyles.

Drumma Boy: It's a lot of positives behind working with Gucci and a few cons. Having so much music leaked and put out for free, that's the downfall. He's getting paid on shows, performing all over the world off of a mixtape you just dropped, but unfortunately [for] the producer, nobody eats. It's more of a reputation thing [that helps you with] attracting other clients.

Todd Moscowitz: I wanted an album, obviously, but I think we figured out what eventually became the new way to market. I wasn't being overly precious about the fact that he was putting out free music.

DJ Holiday: "Bricks" [from 2008's *EA Sportscenter*] really took the fuck off. DJs in different cities were calling me, sending me videos of them playing the record in the club and the whole club going crazy.

Mr. Boomtown (director): At this time, I was living in Dallas. I wasn't really a big director. A friend of mine was a dancer in ATL—she was cool with Gucci. She called me with him on the phone, and he made it seem like he already knew who I was. I sent him to my MySpace page to check out some of my videos. He hit me back, and we went [to Atlanta] to meet him, but once we got out there we couldn't get in contact with him. We finally got in contact with Deb Antney, Waka's mom, and she invited us over to their crib. They all pretty much lived together. She cooked for us and we shot the breeze, just talked business and videos. By the end of the day, Gucci finally showed up. They cut us a check for like $40,000—keep in mind, they had just met us—and it was supposed to be for two videos. We winded up shooting like, three, four months later—I held on to that money all that time. "Bricks" was our first video with Gucci Mane. We had Nicki [Minaj] in the video; we had Waka, Yo Gotti, DJ Drama. I think we had Yung Ralph.

On January 16, 2007, Atlanta police raid the offices of DJ Drama's Aphilliates Music Group, arresting Drama and his partner Don Cannon, as well as 17 others, and seizing over 50,000 mixtapes. Conducted as part of the Recording Industry Association of America crackdown on bootlegging, the raid shakes the mixtape game to its core and causes the artists and labels who work with Drama to produce promotional mixtapes to cry foul.

DJ Drama: [Gucci Mane's September 2008 mixtape] *The Movie* was one of the initial tapes that happened after the raid. The mixtape game was in a different space, and I remember feeling *The Movie* didn't have the big impact I thought it would have. I wasn't printing up a lot of CDs, so the tapes just started to float through the internet. You couldn't really feel who's getting it or how they're getting it. But over the next four, five, six months, I realized as I would travel that the tape had started growing. "Photoshoot" hit the clubs and stuck. When I look back, that's a tape that people consider one of the *Gangsta Grillz* classics. Gucci wound up getting locked up not too long after we released it.

On September 12, 2008, Gucci Mane receives a sentence of one year in jail for failing to complete his 600 hours of community service. (He had only completed 25 hours at the time.) He serves six months at Fulton County Jail and is released on March 13, 2009.

OJ Da Juiceman: When I heard [that Gucci had gone back to jail], I'm like, "I gotta keep the flame on so people won't forget him." At all my shows, I'd always do a Gucci set. I'll tell you, they were hype! Boy, them folks were going crazy. When Gucci came home [in March 2009], it was a burst of videos [and] back to the Atlanta nightlife. We were going to every club. We did so many videos—even songs I wasn't on, I was right alongside him.

DJ Holiday: The day he got out of jail, he came to the studio and recorded "First Day Out." If you're a Gucci fan, that's a hood classic anthem. If there would ever be a movie about Gucci, that would be a dope-ass scene—the whole fucking room lit up when he did that verse: *I start out my day with a blunt of purp...*

Todd Moscowitz: He got out and it was all sorts of madness. He was going in so many different directions. He was doing a million shows, people had booked him in one city while he was away somewhere else. In every city, there were like three promoters that wanted the show.

Coach K: Me and Jeezy, we split in 2007. In 2008-2009, Gucci started to get really, really hot. I mean, he's got the streets fucked up. I happen to run into him at Patchwerk Studios. He came up to me, like, "Yo, I really never had no problems with you. Me and Jeezy didn't see eye-to-eye, but I never really have no problems with you." We ended up exchanging numbers and talking and shit, and at the time he was signed to Warner Bros. Todd Moscowitz was running Asylum/Warner, and Todd brought me on as a consultant to help put Gucci's album together. During that time, Gucci and I spent a lot of time together. I started managing him after that.

Lex Luger (producer): I signed [with Brick Squad Monopoly] in 2009, when I turned 18. Me and Waka were renting out Gucci's old house—didn't buy no furniture, just



Zaytoven's current home studio.

bought studio equipment. At one point Gucci was staying with us [and] all of us was there working 24/7. He and Zaytoven redid the whole basement and made [a studio] right beside his bedroom. So when Gucci got up in the morning, he didn't go to the bathroom—he went to the studio. That's why he said [in "First Day Out"]: *No pancakes, just a cup of syrup*. Like, "I don't want nothing to eat. I'm waking up and I have to work."

Todd Moscowitz: Gucci was the director of the movie, and I was the producer. He was running down the field, [and] I was running alongside him trying to figure out what to do. This kept going on until he eventually hit "Wasted." When that happened we all knew what to do.

Fatboi (producer): The first thing he said when he showed up to the studio was, "What do you think about doing a song called 'Wasted'?" The idea was: What if we can take this suburban term for getting fucked up and flip it and make it urban? Then maybe it'll bounce off urban back into suburbia, because they already think everything that's urban is cool. Now that could be huge. He was thinking about the [May 2009] *Writing on the Wall* mixtape, but I was already thinking, this is going to be the song that kicks his album off.

DJ Holiday: I was leaving the radio station—I was an intern at Hot 107.9—and Gucci randomly called me and asked me to pull up on him to hear some shit. I came to the East Side somewhere on Boldercrest, he was at a house shooting dice or some shit. And he said, "This the one that going to take me out the hood." That nigga was right.

Fatboi: When he left—and to this day Gucci probably doesn't know this—I worked on that record for like a week straight to get it to be the song that it became.

Todd Moscowitz: We realized that there's a change going on with radio. Street records are actually radio records, and we shouldn't fight that. That's a good thing for us. "Wasted" was a record that was one of those street records that sounded like it had much bigger potential.

DJ Holiday: Gucci was already was hood rich, but "Wasted" took us to doing MySpace parties in Orange County, doing Bar Mitzvahs for like 75 grand and shit. Them white kids and they dads, they topped off for Guwop to come perform that one song. It wasn't just hood shit no more. We did the ESPYs and performed at the ESPY party [in 2010]. "Wasted" was always the go-to record. It was bigger than life. [In Atlanta,] Birthday Bash is like Summer Jam [Hot 97's annual New York concert]. As a kid, you and your homies save enough money to go, sit way up in the nosebleeds. Then here I am on the fucking stage, about to DJ for the biggest artist on the bill. It's a weird feeling, to know that your dude is about to headline Birthday Bash.

Zaytoven: Gucci being in jail [had] just helped him that much more because people just waiting on him. The whole Birthday Bash crowd, all they waiting on is Gucci Mane. Me and OJ were on stage before Gucci come out, and they cut all the lights out for a long time. It was like, "Dang, is he even coming out?" Then he came out, and they did "Make the Trap Say Aye," and it just erupted the whole place. He did his whole show with "Bricks," "I'm a Dog" and all the street classics. It was like, okay, can't nobody beat him right now.

DJ Holiday: He brought out Nicki because she was on *Writing on the Wall*. He brought out Waka, Frenchie, Wooh, all of them. That's when the whole 1017 movement kicked the fuck off in the city.

Coach K: He was hot as hell. He had like five records going at the club: "Wasted," "Bricks," "I Think I Love Her," "Photoshoot," and "Set It Off"; "She Got a Friend" with Juelz [Santana] and Big Boi. From the hood clubs to the Hollywood clubs to the hipster clubs—all of 'em was playing the same shit.

Todd Moscowitz: Then all of the remixes [featuring Gucci] came out: the Mario, The Black Eyed Peas, the Mariah Carey. Every street record had him on it.

Kori Anders: People were calling my phone to get at him. Talib Kweli called me directly [to get to Gucci].

DJ Drama: We were on a roll. He came to me with the title of the [October 2009 mixtape] *Burrrprint*, and I was like, "That's fucking genius." It was around the time of the [BET] Hip-Hop Awards, and that tape was just one of the ones—like the way *Trap or Die* was, or the way Future's wave is right now. Gucci was hot as fish grease, and *Burrrprint* was going like hot cakes. I remember the attention it was getting, from the streets and from the critics alike. Gucci had surpassed just being a street rapper and everybody was on his dick.

Todd Moscowitz: We were moving towards putting an album out in the fall [of 2009]. Then a month before the album, he was like, "I wanna put out three mixtapes." We were like, "We just went on this whole mixtape run. It's time for the album." He's like, "No, trust me, I got this." So he dropped the *Cold War* series.

Coach K: Todd was trippin.

DJ Holiday: [That was] one of Gucci's random ideas. He's just creatively always

PHOTOGRAPHY IRINA ROZOVSKY FOR THE FADER (LEFT). DIWANG VALDEZ (RIGHT).



“The jail stints slowed him down, but at the same time I think those were times where Gucci Mane got to rest and reevaluate everything and get back hungry. Gucci is built for this stuff. I hear guys rap about how tough they say they are—Gucci Mane one of them guys that’s that for real.”

Zaytoven

thinking about new stuff to do and what can he do to one-up on somebody. He was always like, "They sleep, bruh. They sleepin; I'm working. That's how we gonna kill 'em." And that's what we did.

DJ Drama: Gucci was such a workhorse, he really only let *Burrrprint* live for like two weeks. You go and drop this instant classic tape and then two weeks later, here comes three more. That idea was dope, but I wasn't all the way with it. I was like, "My nigga, let's let it breathe."

Kori Anders: He felt weird not recording. He felt weird sitting on records. When he recorded a record, he wanted to put that joint out that night. And sometimes he did that. He would record in the morning and by that night it was on the radio or played in the strip club.

Coach K: You're not going to outwork him. Period. To finish up [2009 album *The State vs. Radric Davis*], we shot six videos in two days because we knew he had to go [back] to court and we didn't know if they were going to keep him or not.

Mr. Boomtown: We would shoot what I would call marathons. That's when we did "Heavy," "I Think I Want Her," "Bingo" with Soulja Boy and Waka. From the set, they're either going to the studio or to a show.

Coach K: At the time, he was in a rehab program, and he used to sneak out and come to the studio and we would knock out records.

Todd Moscowitz: He was basically ready to hand the album in, and it was amazing. It had "Wasted" on it. It had "Lemonade." It had a lot of great, great stuff. In the middle of this whole process, Gucci gets sentenced to go back to jail.

Coach K: Everything was going, all cylinders were open. Then he had to sit out for eight months. Most of the records were done, but I had to go in and put an album together while he was in jail. We didn't even get to promote the album or anything.

Todd Moscowitz: Among the good things we did, we started opening up the alternative audience a little bit. One of my best friends, Kevin Kusatsu, was partners with Diplo. He was like, "Oh my God. Diplo's a huge Gucci fan." We got Diplo to remix the *Cold War* series and pull a couple of records from each tape and basically put his own version out.

Coach K: Diplo sets, they play electronic music, but those hipster kids, they want to hear that real deal trap shit. And Gooch was the king of that. Diplo and them play the world. Electronic music is huge. So if we can take Gucci's vocals and put it on some hard-hitting electronic beats and service the world with that shit? That's just going to make his fan base even crazier. So I picked out the a cappellas. When that tape came out it was huge.

DJ Holiday: One time we was in L.A. and Gucci was like, "Yo, you want to go to a techno party? This shit gonna be big one day." I was just like, "Nigga, what do you know about a techno party?" He liked the lights, the beats, and all that type of shit. He was rapping verses to me in my ear to the techno beats. And I said, "Well, you know one day this shit might merge." Now you got people like DJ Carnage who mix these trap beats with these EDM beats.

Todd Moscowitz: While all the jail stuff was going on, we got a huge buzz off the mixtapes, the white college kids were going crazy over "Wasted," Diplo was remixing these records, and Diplo and Mad Decent put out that Free Gucci T-shirt, which became a meme and a huge viral sensation. All of those things were kind of happening at the same time. And then Gucci, before he goes away, delivers this "Lemonade" video—all yellow everything. It fucking popped the balloon at its highest point.

Coach K: Gucci used to tell ["Lemonade" producer] Bangladesh, "Give me that crazy shit [that] don't nobody want to rap on! And I'm gonna go stupid retarded on it!" And then he went in there and we did "Lemonade." Gucci freestyled a lot, but he also used to write. That was one of the first times that I seen him sit there and really write down the song.

Todd Moscowitz: "Lemonade" showed how musically diverse and ambidextrous he was. But the album itself was amazing. It came out. It sold 90,000 [copies] first week. It was a huge statement for him.

Coach K: Right when we got it to the place where it was like, "Damn, we're about to crush these dudes," we kept having setbacks.

On November 12, 2009, Gucci Mane returns to Fulton County Jail after receiving another 12-month sentence for violating the terms of his probation. He serves six months and is released on May 12, 2010.

Todd Moscowitz: The timing couldn't [have been] worse. He was white hot. It was at the biggest moment of his career when we were about to turn that corner, and then it happened. It was a huge emotional letdown.

Zaytoven: Anytime he sit down, all we talking about is, "Oh, Zay, I want to do a record like this." Or, "Check this out, I just



DeKalb County Jail, where Gucci Mane was transferred after a 2013 arrest.

PHOTOGRAPHY IRINA ROZOVSKY FOR THE FADER.

wrote this. Make a beat for this." It's like he's still out [and] right around the corner. So the [jail stints] slowed him down, but at the same time I think those were times where Gucci Mane got to rest and reevaluate everything and get back hungry. Gucci is built for this stuff. I hear guys rap about how tough they say they are—Gucci Mane one of them guys that's that for real. He just as happy when he in there as he is when he out. And I'm right there in good spirits with him every time. If he didn't [keep] getting put away the way he did, he wouldn't come with the records like "First Day Out" or the street records that make him so relevant still to this day. [Those] come from him bumping his head over and over. There's a certain edge that come with that.

DJ Holiday: He never brought his personal shit to the studio. That legal shit, that's him and his lawyer. He wasn't emotional, like, "Aw, I'm fucked up!" That nigga going to jail, he'll call from jail, first day in there, like, "Hey, Holiday. Get my hard drive, put out some tapes. I'll let you know when I want to drop them." Cool. A lot of people was intimidated from the whole [2005] murder case situation. How many people you can actually say you stood next to that killed somebody? He defended himself, but this motherfucker really walked the walk and talked the talk of what he do. Nobody would try his ass. He was like the pied piper of the hood. Everybody wanted to be around him and absorb that energy. I walked with that man in the city of Chicago and you would have thought motherfucking Nelson Mandela showed up or some shit.

Coach K: For Gooch, when he goes and gets locked up, it hypes his fans up even more. [They're] waiting on him. But you gotta build that shit back up. [So] I go in and I do a whole mixtape while he's locked up—[March 2010's] the *Burrrprint 2*.

Richie Abbott (former VP of urban publicity at Warner Bros. Records): It was the first mixtape that he put out that you couldn't just get off of LiveMixtapes or DatPiff. There was a huge debate over that. I don't even know that Gucci wanted that to be available only commercially. I think that was a decision made on the part of the label.

DJ Drama: They did the *Burrrprint 2* through Asylum, with Holiday. Which at the time I was hot about because, you know, "What the fuck? This is a series we did together—how dare this not come to me?"

Coach K: The *Burrrprint 2*, we did over 100,000 [sales].

Todd Moscowitz: He got out in May [2010]. I went and picked him up at Fulton County Jail. Wale was somehow in the SUV with us and we all went straight to the studio—Gucci in one room, Waka in the other. That was the night Waka made "No Hands."

Drumma Boy: Gucci booked the whole Patchwerk Studios. I gave him a folder of beats. The first song we did was "Abnormal." He takes that beat, goes in the studio, and I go in the B Room and [there's] like 100 people [in there]. The B Room in Patchwerk is not that big. I got all my equipment—my beat machine, my keyboard—everything lined up, but I can't even touch the keyboard. So if you listen to "No Hands," the chords are super simple because I'm barely able to play a damn chord. I'm reaching over people making the beat. And then I got back to the A Room, and we do "Ferrari Boyz." I make beats off of my emotions, and that night I was just so relieved and so happy to see all of us together. It was almost like a family reunion—you and all of your favorite guys in one studio making history.

Todd Moscowitz: Obviously "No Hands" turned out to be a huge hit.

Richie Abbott: *The State vs. Radric Davis* was a great example of a mixtape artist kind of transitioning and kind of going mainstream. [But] I've seen this movie so many times, I don't even want the DVD. Gucci just was not ready for the next level of success and what it took at that time. Anything that was really mainstream—like *New York Times* or late night television or maybe *SPIN* or *Rolling Stone*—he never really got up for it. He was just in his own world. I respect that, but it felt like he was maybe not totally in a good place to play the game.

Todd Moscowitz: He came out with the best intentions. I remember him saying, "Big dog, I got this." He was focused. He was gonna get this done. And then he fell back into a bunch of trouble.

Kori Anders: He [went] from this happy-go-lucky guy that loved being in the studio into this darker space. I think that had to do with pressures the labels were putting on him.

Coach K: I think that sophomore album curse hit Gooch. Because although we had a great album, he wanted to go bigger and bigger. He was like, "Get me in the studio with Timbaland. Get me in the studio with Pharrell." All these big names. No disrespect, they are incredible producers, but I think we started running away from everything that got us there. And his fans let us know that. He's raw on everything he got on, don't get me wrong, but I think *The Appeal* album, he was going through a lot. The court shit, that was on him bad, and I think he just wanted to kind of change people's look on him.

Kori Anders: I think that pressure of trying to juggle keeping it real for the streets but also trying to get to that mainstream success was just at times too much for him.

Todd Moscowitz: Gucci was definitely struggling and spiraling. We were having a lot of trouble getting stuff done, and at the same time Waka's stuff was really taking off.

Richie Abbott: That was the beginning of the fallout between Gucci and Waka. One guy is kind of falling off. He helped escort the other dude in, and the other dude is taking off. It's kind of a classic scenario.

Todd Moscowitz: Waka was like, "I'm doing a mixtape." He played the mixtape and we fought to get "No Hands." There was an argument as to whose record it was, but it was our session, so we ended up with the record. Waka plays the rest of the music, and he's like, "These are all street records. This is my mixtape." We're like, "That's ridiculously good. That's your album." Street records were becoming radio

records. and Waka started getting super hot over the summer. Gucci's album [*The Appeal: Georgia's Most Wanted*] came out in September. Right after that, everything kind of fell apart.

On November 2, 2010, Atlanta police discover Gucci Mane arguing with an unnamed man after driving his Hummer down the wrong side of Northside Drive. According to the *Atlanta-Journal Constitution*, the police use pepper spray to bring him into custody. They arrest him for traffic violations, damage to government property, and obstruction of justice. Although charges are later dropped "for want of prosecution," the incident sends Gucci back to court for possibly violating the terms of his probation. On December 27, 2010, Gucci's lawyers file a Special Plea of Mental Incompetency on Gucci's behalf, saying that Gucci is "unable to go forward and/or intelligently participate in the probation revocation hearing." On January 3, 2011, a judge in the Superior Court of Fulton County orders Gucci sent to Anchor Hospital, a local psychiatric and chemical dependency center. On January 13, 2011, days after his release from the hospital, photos began circulating online of Gucci's new tattoo—a "Brrr" branded, three-scoop ice cream cone shooting lightning bolts on his right cheek.

Todd Moscowitz: I don't want to get too into his personal stuff, but that [2010 arrest] was kind of the last straw for me. Each time, we would recommit to each other and work together. He would tell me he was going to be the biggest artist in the world, and this time it would be different. But we ended up in the same place, obviously, a couple of times. It had an impact on [our] relationship, honestly. I think he felt bad about it. I felt bad about it. It was really, really tough. Tough for him. Tough for us. Tough for me and him. We definitely had a bumpy time after that. There were a couple of months where we weren't in as much contact, and then we reconnected.

Coach K: When he gets locked up that time, I went in and did another mixtape—*The Return of Mr. Zone 6*. I had to take it back to the streets. We figured out that Gucci fans need music, we have to supply them with music. He has a cult following.

Drumma Boy: Warner was down about Gucci getting locked up and not being able to do shows he had lined up. I was like, "What do you think about putting out a mixtape or an album that I executive produce? I have so many songs [by] Gucci. We can put something out on iTunes and make some money." They okayed it, and Gucci called me from jail like, "It's gonna be a lot of pressure on you, [but] if we can get it done, I'm down." They sold 22,000 copies first week. For them to spend $150,000 on the budget and make $2.5 million within a seven-eight month period, that's a hell of a turnaround.

Coach K: Even the label agreed after that. They were like, "You're right. All that [chase for] Top 40, all that shit, don't worry about that. Let's just get his music out there to his following." On *Mr. Zone 6*, we did 100,000 [sales], and that was a mixtape. After that, we set the trends. I went into Warner, where he had a label deal, restructured and negotiated a whole mixtape deal for three mixtapes for a certain amount of money outside of his album deal. It hadn't been done. After we did that, you start seeing artists come out and put these mixtapes out commercially. Shit, Drake just did.

Todd Moscowitz: I think I was the first label to put out mixtapes commercially. I realized, not just from my experience with Gucci, but also with Dipset and Cam'Ron, that the mixtapes were the albums. The major labels in general were too caught up with the distinction between what's a mixtape and what's an album—especially with the internet, the kids were past that. Sometimes we would give them away, and sometimes we would sell them and we'd say it's a mixtape, but fuck it. It's 17 songs that you can love. Why wouldn't you buy it?

On April 8, 2011, Gucci is charged with misdemeanor battery for allegedly pushing a woman out of his Hummer after she refused an offer of $150 to join him at a nearby hotel. In September 2011, Gucci pleads guilty to two counts of battery, two counts of reckless conduct, and one count of disorderly conduct in relation to the incident. He is sentenced to six months in Fulton County Jail and ordered to attend anger management classes. He is released early for good behavior on December 11, 2011, after serving three months.

Coach K: He was in and out. He had a couple more stints in jail, but we was running.

DJ Holiday: For [February 2012 tape] *Trap Back*, he randomly called me at five in the morning. He felt like he hadn't done a really, really hardcore trap mixtape in a while. He's like, "Yo, my nigga, we got to get the trap back." I was like, "We lost the trap?" [He said] "Nah, nah, nah, not like that. We always got the trap. But let's just do this tape for the trap. We want our trap back." We really started from the bottom. He went back to the East Side. Mike WiLL, Zaytoven, and all them turnt the fuck up.

Mike WiLL Made-It: I'd been working with 2 Chainz, Future, Shawty Lo—just different people in the city, working on elevating my sound. By the time Gucci and I linked back up [in the summer of 2011], I had a new sound. We were in the studio and my phone rung, and my ringtone was Future's "Ain't No Way Around It." He was like, "Damn, bruh, how I get a song like this?" I'm like, "Let me pick you a beat, and then you gotta go in and just do it with Auto-Tune, but do your version." I gave him the "Nasty" beat and he was vibing. He was like, "I might put Wayne on this shit." And I was like, "Wayne would be hard, but, shit, I think Future would be the look." He knew who Future was, but I'm telling him, "That nigga Future hard as fuck. Put Future on that motherfucker, he gonna snap." So Future got on that shit. And then Future got on the other song [I did] with Gucci with 2 Chainz, "Lost It." From there Gucci [was] like, "Shit, I like Future. You think I should do a tape [July 2011's *Free Bricks*] with him?" I'm like, "Man, hell yeah."

Todd Moscowitz: Whenever he got out—[December] 2011—we started talking again. At the end of the day, he and I are

PHOTOGRAPHY DIWANG VALDEZ.













Gucci Mane, Waka Flocka Flame, Todd Moscowitz, and friends at Patchwerk Studios, on the night of Gucci Mane's May 2010 release from Fulton County Jail.

friends as much as we are anything else. As a friend, you just have to be there for people. When you sit down with a friend, you get past it. I'd moved from being at Asylum to becoming the CEO of Warner Bros. I moved out to L.A., and one day he came out to see me. He said again, "I'm getting my situation together. I'm gonna do this again." I think I told him he should change his name to Trap God.

Coach K: We had a show out in L.A. This is one of the first shows Gucci did in L.A., a big concert party for The Hundreds. There were probably 3,000 kids in there. You got gangbangers, hipster kids, blacks, Mexicans, whites—it's packed out. And when I say Gucci tears this place down, all you have to do is Google "Gucci Mane and Tyler, the Creator," because Tyler got thrown off the stage that night by security. That was the first time Gucci was performing for all the little hipster kids. They were like, "Gucci's God, man. He's the god of the trap." My wheels start running. And I start calling him the Trap God.

Todd Moscowitz: We came up with this idea and he started releasing these *Trap God* mixtapes. He wanted to put stuff out again, not commercially. I was like, "No problem. Do you. You won't have any issues from Warner." At some point I left Warner, but we remained friends.

Coach K: When they took the urban department away at Warner, [Gucci] had to go back to Atlantic, where the people he didn't see eye-to-eye with were. They just didn't get it. So we just started putting out our own music and releasing our own projects. [2012's] *Trap God* was the first album that we put up ourselves on iTunes. We bucked the system. That's when it got real. It created this frenzy again. The streets were back on fire. Future was already booming. [Young] Thug was running around. But when Gucci had the Brick Factory [studio], it was a home for all the street rappers. Gucci gives you that confidence. He makes you feel comfortable. You'd come over there, you can record, you gonna get records done. The Peewees and Thugs and Migos—[when] he invites you to the studio and he actually doing records with you, that's big.

Sean Paine (engineer): Gucci requested me to record him one day when no other available engineers were around. I actually wasn't supposed to be doing this shit, but I took a chance. At the time, I was damn near homeless, sleeping in my car. He approached me with a situation where I could come stay with him and run his studio. So I took another chance. It was right after Christmas 2012.

Zaytoven: I'm the one that went and got every last piece of studio equipment that was in the Brick Factory. [Gucci was] like, "I need a studio for this room. I need a studio for that room. I need a studio downstairs." And I'm like, "Cool, I'm gonna go make it happen." They was sleeping and staying over there, recording every day.

Sean Paine: The Brick Factory was right in the middle of East Atlanta. It was two floors, three studios. A couple of lounge rooms. A weight [and] boxing room. It was non-stop working. We had Gucci in one room. Thug in another room. Peewee in another room. [Then] Peewee might leave [and] Zay pull up. [Then] Drumma Boy pull up. C-Note in the other room. All rooms were always occupied. I opened the gate. I watched the cameras. I had the strap. Shit. Made sure everything was on point.



The Brick Factory.

Coach K: An artist might be in there writing [and] Gucci [will] be like, "Just go in the booth, man. Let your emotions out. That's your heart. Don't be scared." That was his whole shit he'd tell artists. "Don't even worry about it. Just go in there."

Young Dolph (rapper): When I got close to him, I really seen that he wasn't no different from me. Even though he was a major artist, he still do his thing like he's independent. One thing he told me that stuck with me was, "No matter what, just keep on doing music. Can't nobody control it. Can't nobody do nothing. You ain't gotta do nothing but keep dropping music." So that's all I did, all the way up to this point.

Quavo (rapper, member of Migos): We was grinding, shooting the "Bando" video [and] the streets were going crazy. I guess Gucci saw [that] and was like, "Man, we gotta find these young niggas." He called my boy, and our manager was like, "Where y'all at?" We pulled up to the Brick Factory and we talked to him that day, and from that day on, it was just love. We locked in. It wasn't no business, like you need to sign something. It was just love. No paperwork. We were just working all night [and] all day. He'd wake me up like, "Quavo! Quavo! Let's do this. Let's record." He's a workaholic. He might do a whole mixtape that night. We'd go to sleep in the studio.

DJ Holiday: The Brick Factory was like a school. All these people under one roof, trying to figure it out. Gucci was just over there teaching.

Rich Homie Quan (rapper): I learned a lot from Gucci: always record, never stop. You can never have too many songs. Whenever he would call, I would just go, cause I knew we were going make something great. We looked up to him like a big brother.

Cam Kirk (photographer): I was surprised at how down to earth he was. I worked

PHOTOGRAPHY IRINA ROZOVSKY FOR THE FADER.

with a few artists prior to him and I never got that level of respect. He took the time to learn my name and to address me by name and not "cameraman." It's not a lot of politics with him. He's just in it for the art of creating and helping other people out. He treated me like the biggest photographer in the world, and I was just really starting.

Mike WiLL, Metro Boomin, Young Thug, Migos, Rich Homie Quan—we all have a middle connection to Gucci Mane. He touched all of our careers at a very early stage. He's changed a lot of lives. It's like a large tree branch of people that have been influenced or in some way impacted by what he's been able to create. When he gets out, there are going to be even more people he's going to touch because he never has a problem reaching out and trusting people.

DJ Drama: Gucci has been one of the best A&Rs, clearly, to come out of Atlanta, and beyond that.

Drumma Boy: Gucci has an ear for talent and passion. He loves to give people a shot.

On September 7, 2013, Gucci Mane begins a three-day Twitter rant in which he levels shocking, often vulgar, accusations at wide swaths of the hip-hop community, including Waka Flocka Flame, Nicki Minaj, and OJ Da Juiceman. The tweets spark widespread confusion and Gucci claims that his account has been hacked. Later that month, he appears to apologize in another series of clear-eyed tweets. He admits to an addiction to prescription cough syrup, asks for forgiveness, and says he will seek treatment.

Zaytoven: I was with him at the studio before that happened. I could tell that he was anxious. He was ready to make some moves.

DJ Drama: Gucci is erratic. He's had his problems with substance abuse at various times, and I think it got the best of him. And Twitter, it's dangerous. In one instance you can do so much damage. At that time, I thought it was a possibility that he could have been hacked because he was going extremely far. I was taken aback by it. But that's Gucci. He's not one to play the political game. One thing you can never take from him, that nigga has always been one of the realest and has said how he feels, and he stands by what he says. He doesn't hold his tongue.



Parking lot at the Burger King at the corner of Moreland and East Confederate Avenues, where Gucci Mane was arrested in September 2013.

Lex Luger: If it was him or was not him, he spoke his mind. When business doesn't work out, those emotions come out.

Mr. Boomtown: The last time we [had] talked, we couldn't agree on a budget. When I saw [the Twitter] shit I was like, "Wow. He is going off. Shit, he taking shots at everybody. I know he gonna take a shot at me." He didn't, but then I got a call. Gucci was like, "Boom, man, put the trailer [for the Mr. Boomtown-directed comedy *The Spot*, starring Gucci and Rocko] up on WorldStar." I'm like, "Huh?" [He's like] "Man, it's my movie. Put the trailer up on WorldStar." That was the last conversation we had. I don't know what happened that day, but I think he was just venting and it came out the wrong way. I never talked to him about it. Wouldn't probably even ask him about it.

Just after midnight on September 14, 2013, Gucci Mane is arrested near the intersection of Moreland and East Confederate Avenues by police responding to a call from a friend who had grown concerned by his erratic behavior. According to a police report, as more officers arrived on the scene, Gucci grows increasingly agitated, "yelling and cursing and threatening police," at one point even telling responding officers that "he would shoot [them] up." Gucci is searched and found to have "a clear plastic baggie containing suspected marijuana" and a loaded .40-caliber Glock handgun in his right jean pocket. An EMS team sedates him on the scene and takes him to Grady Hospital, where he is charged with disorderly conduct, felon in possession of a firearm, possession of a controlled substance, and carrying a concealed weapon without a license. He spends a night in Grady Hospital for psychiatric evaluation before being transferred to DeKalb County Jail.

On November 19, 2013, Gucci is indicted by a federal grand jury on two counts of possession of a firearm by a felon, stemming from that night on Moreland Ave. and also from an incident just two days earlier—September 12, 2013—in

which police responded to a disturbance at the office of Gucci Mane's attorney, Drew Findling, and found a loaded .45-caliber Taurus among Gucci Mane's things. Gucci claimed that the gun belonged to his girlfriend, who was not on the scene, and no charges were filed at the time.

On December 3, 2013, Gucci Mane is arraigned in federal court on the two gun charges, carrying a maximum sentence of 10 years and up to a $250,000 fine each.

Sean Paine: [The Brick Factory] closed that day.

Mike WiLL Made-It: This time, I was like, "Damn, man. The jail might not play with his ass because he got a lot of charges pending." It was just like, "Fuck."

Sean Paine: When I first heard that they were talking about 40 years, I was just astonished. I think everybody was. I couldn't believe it.

Coach K: Gucci was just in and out. I love him to death, for real. But it's still a business. When you're putting all of yourself into something and it keeps happening, you need to make a business decision, so we went our own ways [in early 2013].

OJ Da Juiceman: Gucci is a good person in the heart. With the drugs involved, I can't tell you, because that detours a lot of people and intervenes a lot. Deep down inside, I know he's a good nigga. I haven't really spoken to him and I can't really say where we are right now. But we've slept in cars together, you know what I'm saying? He'll always be my boy. No matter what.

Sean Paine: I ended up not engineering for a minute [and] I was working a regular job at the mall. Then I get a call [from jail, and] Gucci's like, "I need you to handle [releasing music] for me. I ain't about to let this stop me." From then on, we've been dropping shit to keep him relevant and give the streets what they want.

Drumma Boy: He grinded his ass off for those years that he was free to make as much music as possible and put himself in a situation where when he can keep putting out music until [he gets] out. That's what we're seeing right now.

Sean Paine: Maybe Gucci knew [he was going away] ahead of time. Maybe that's why he was working so hard. But we never discussed getting locked up. Hell nah. We were discussing him getting off probation. He'd been on probation for so long [and] he was just about to get off. We were discussing celebrating that. And then all this bullshit.

Lex Luger: Everybody make mistakes, but he really influenced the sound and the culture in Atlanta. Music is a part of it, but the way he moves, his interviews, all of that also influenced people. Not just the music. As a black man, that's an icon. He lives like he wants to live—he got an ice cream cone on his face, he driving a Phantom and he got 18 bedrooms in this house, you know? He's not a dummy. He's a legend. This nigga will walk anywhere—any mall, any street, anywhere he wants. That's like some Al Capone shit. He comes from where he comes from, and even if he would change, he would go back because it's in his blood and it's in his roots. That's just the type of nigga he is. I think that's why he lasted so long in this game.

Zaytoven: You can ask anybody in Atlanta now and they're gonna be like, "Oh, Gucci Mane, [he's] my favorite rapper." The tracks that we laid ten years ago [are] holding Atlanta music up right now.

Coach K: Gucci's run was raw. He brought a raw, gifted talent, [and] the kids like the real shit. They love the authenticity. Gooch was so authentic, you lived through his music because you could see everything that he was doing—if he was going to jail, getting into a fight, his whole story was documented. At times, he might have kept it too real. But who's to say? T.I. had an album, *Trap Muzik*, and Jeezy had trap songs, but Gucci was the epitome of the young boy in the hood, waking up every day in the trap.

Todd Moscowitz: I think he's one of the most important artists of our time. He's the source of so much of what's going on, not just in hip-hop, but in music in general, including the trap EDM stuff. He's influenced an entire generation of rappers and artists. Beyond that, I personally think that despite his troubles, which are well documented, he's just a great human being. He is an incredibly deep, thoughtful, and sincere person.

On May 13, 2014, Gucci Mane pleads guilty to possession of a firearm by a convicted felon, avoiding trial in the federal gun case. On August 10, 2014, U.S. District Judge Steve Jones sentences him to 39 months in federal prison, with credit for time served. On September 15, 2014, Gucci receives an additional three-year sentence in Fulton County after pleading guilty to aggravated assault stemming from a March 16, 2013, incident in which Gucci hit an Army staff sergeant with a bottle at a nightclub in Atlanta. He is transferred to United States Penitentiary, Terre Haute, where he remains today. Although the Federal Bureau of Prisons lists his scheduled release date as March 2017, those close to him suggest—without being specific—that he will be home sooner. *The Spot* is slated for an October 2015 release, and an autobiography is in the works.

Sean Paine: While he's locked up, that doesn't mean he's not working. He's gonna do a movie. He's writing his book. I think he said he wrote over 200 songs since he's been locked up. Those are written songs—that's different from the punch-in rap.

Coach K: The dude is a poet, man. He's a real poet. When he sits down and writes, it's some of the most incredible shit for real.

Mike WiLL Made-It: I talk to Gucci every day. He [sounds] confident and swagged up. Gucci is only 35. He's never really been out and been there for the whole rollout process of an album and shot videos and toured. He's still got time to do that.

Todd Moscowitz: [He's] in shape, plotting every day. He's got time on his hands and he's using it all toward thinking about the future. We're both still figuring out [the specifics of a business relationship], but we have plans to do a bunch of things together. The story isn't over.

PHOTOGRAPHY DIWANG VALDEZ.


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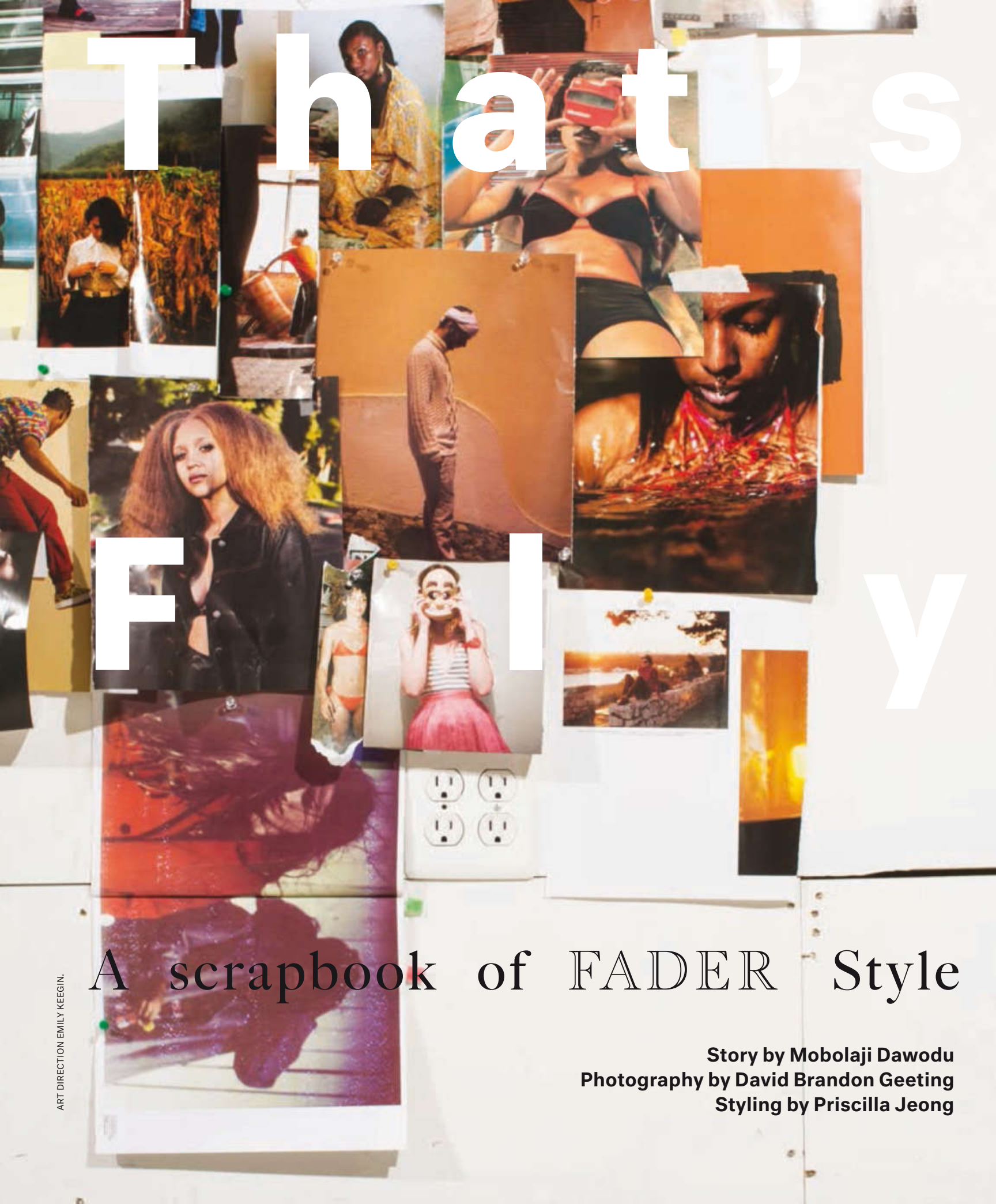








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That's Fly

A scrapbook of FADER Style

Story by Mobolaji Dawodu
Photography by David Brandon Geeting
Styling by Priscilla Jeong

ART DIRECTION EMILY KEEGIN.

MOBOLAJI DAWODU has travelled the world, meeting then casting real people for FADER fashion stories. This is his tribute to the bits of personality they have shared.



















BATHING SUIT BY **TOMMY HILFIGER**, NECKLACE


ISRAEL WEARS JACKET BY RALPH LAUREN.
TOMMY HILFIGER







PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER VAN AGTMAEL, STEVEN BRAHM, LEE BROMFIELD, DIETMAR BUSSE, ANDREW DOSUNMU, CAROLYN DRAKE, TIERNEY GEARON, BEN GRIEME, LÉONIE HAMPTON, KRISANNE JOHNSON, SANDY KIM, JUSTIN MAXON, DEBORA MITTLESTAEDT, JASON NOCITO, GABRIELE STABILE, GEORDIE WOOD

IT WAS THE WINTER OF 1999.

To this day, I don't know why I got a phone call from The FADER.
Might have been the work I did as Art Director for LA-based, Subculture Magazine. Might have been the design work that I did for various projects at the legendary Rawkus Records. Anyway, they sat me down, told me what The FADER was going to be about and I was all-in. The catch? I had 72 hrs to design the entire issue — cover to cover.

After zero sleep and too many McDonald's Extra Value Meals, we birthed the legendary Zack De La Rocha/Rev Run/DJ Premier Issue — complete with new logo, new masthead and new format.

They loved the work I did and wanted more of my time. Just one problem: I had this other company called Staple; with its own staff and everything. So the smarty-pant execs at The FADER offered me the one thing I couldn't resist — office space! They gave Staple their entire conference room, which sat in the middle of FADER's headquarters with all-glass walls.
(This would soon be known as the "Staple Fishbowl". Haha!)

The new millennium dawned on us (remember the Y2K Bug??) and we really wanted to revolutionize what music lifestyle journalism meant. From that point on, we hit people over the head with the most innovative covers, features and content anyone had ever seen. What other publication could boast Beck, D'Angelo, Mos Def, Eminem, DeLaSoul, Sade, Erykah Badu, The Roots, Outkast, Bjork, The Gorillaz, The White Stripes, N.E.R.D., and more? (That's all in the first dozen issues BTW.)

The amount of seeds planted, trees grown and branches stretched from The FADER are now uncountable. So many amazing talents graced these hallowed halls and I'm proud that I was able to put my imprint on history.

Happy 100 FADER. You don't look a day over 99!

My Best Always,

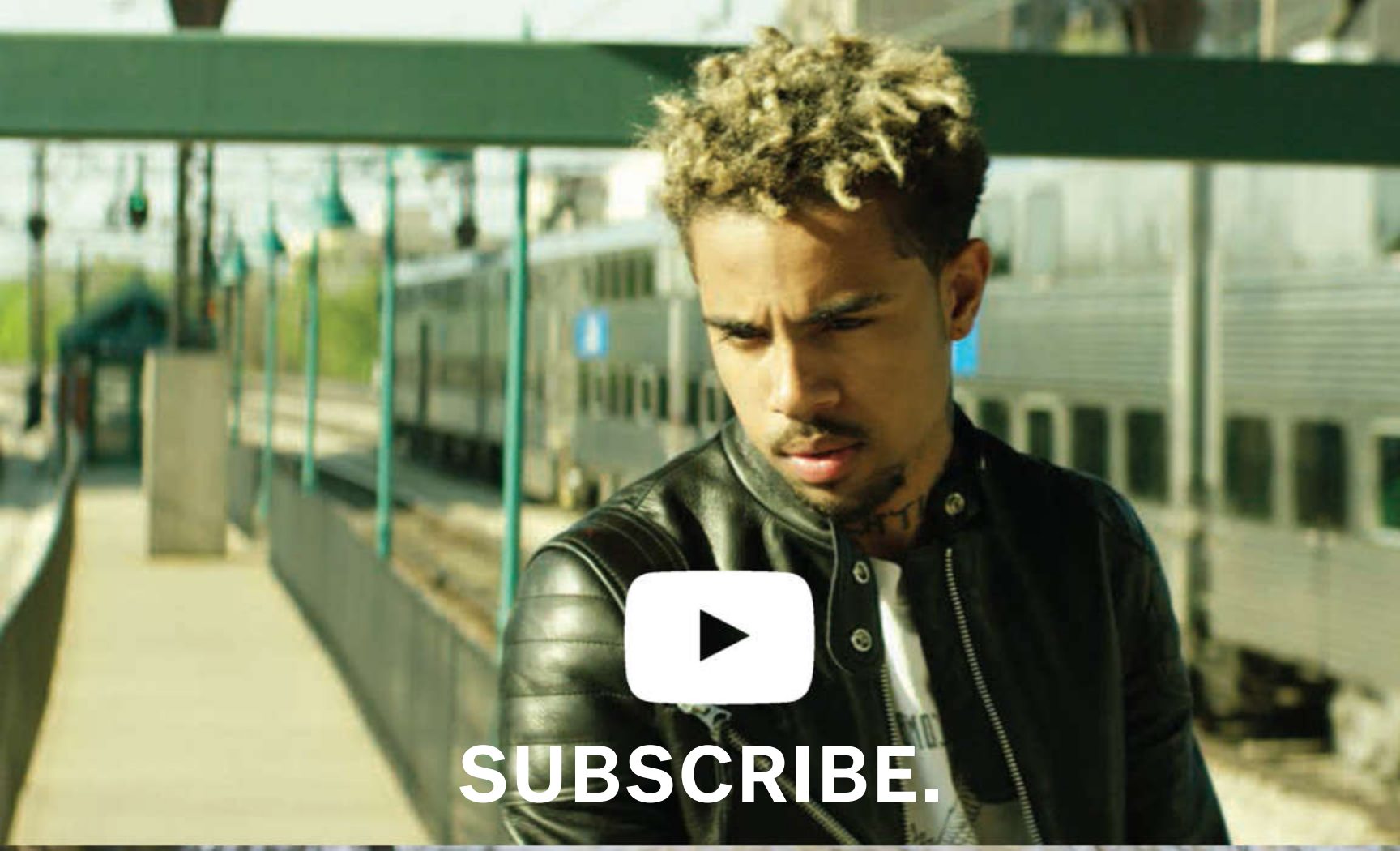


Founder & Creative Director of Staple + Reed Space,

@jeffstaple
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Introducing video cover stories—everything you love about The FADER, on video. Episodes on Vic Mensa, Allan Kingdom, and more.

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I TRUST YOU

The ridiculous and true story of how The FADER was born and survived

Compiled by Alex Frank, Patrick D. McDermott, Joseph Patel, Steven Roberts, and Naomi Zeichner



PHOTOGRAPHY EMILY KEEGIN FOR THE FADER.

Instead of looking back, The FADER has typically chosen to look forward, focusing on the young creatives who nudge culture ahead. But now, on the occasion of our 100th issue, it feels like the right time for a little history, if for no other reason than to call attention to the great minds, great music, and great luck that has carried The FADER through 16 years in an industry that changes at lightning speed. Here, members of the FADER family past and present look back on their time at the magazine and explain how we made it to this milestone.

The FADER was founded in 1999 by two childhood friends, Rob Stone and Jon Cohen, as an outgrowth of their music marketing agency, Cornerstone.

Jon Cohen (co-founder and co-CEO): The FADER was an idea that Lee Harrison, who was heading up a lot of the creative on the Cornerstone side of the company, had been kicking around with Rob. How do we show the DJ community more about the projects we are working on? It was initially intended to really expose all the great music we were involved with, particularly the hip-hop side—more of a trade industry pamphlet.

Eric Ducker (former senior editor): FADER was conceived of more as a magazine that appealed to DJs. There would be pages where DJs around the country would make their top three record picks.

Jonathan Mannion (photographer): The first issue was Funkmaster Flex. The team was rushed and pressed, and if they didn't make deadline, they weren't going to have the magazine. I literally shot the cover on the side of the building at my lab on 30th and Lexington. I was throwing rolls up to my lab on the second floor to have it back by the evening to be able to go to press.

Rob Stone (co-founder and co-CEO): We didn't have money to pay Jonathan when we started. He did the first four covers on a handshake. I think we bought him a computer because he had mentioned that he needed a new computer, so we just got him whatever was the best Mac out there. But it wasn't really about the money for him. It was the freedom that other publications weren't giving people, we would give.

Eric Ducker: As the magazine took on a life of its own, Lee decided that this could be a real magazine, not just a DJ magazine. Lee didn't know how to edit or write, so he brought on Eddie, who had that history.

Eddie Brannan (former creative and editorial director): At the time, there was literally black music magazines, and there was white music magazines. There was *Spin*, *Rolling Stone*, and then there was the *Source*, *XXL*, and *Vibe*. But we weren't listening to music in that way.

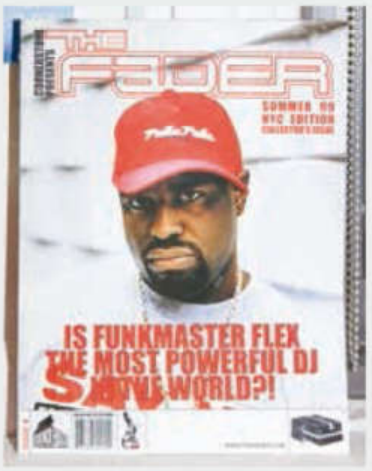
Jon Cohen: If you were to say where FADER had its real launching point, I would say it was issue three, where we brought Beck and D'Angelo together and we started meeting some real writers and real people with experience. The artists came casual—there was not a high level of stylists, and there weren't publicists around controlling the moment. They sat down and had a conversation, and Beck had rolled a joint for the occasion. It really set the tone for what FADER has become.

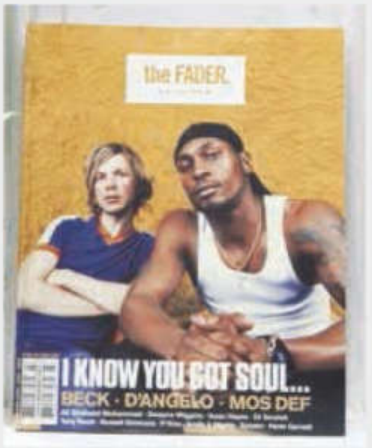
Eddie Brannan: We would take writers who were more typically associated with one genre, then have them write about music or stuff from another genre. We would do the same with photographers. We always tried to pull the rug out from under people's feet a little bit, get them out of their comfort zone.



Andy Cohn, Jon Cohen, and Rob Stone.

Jon Caramanica (writer, *New York Times* pop critic): I don't want to say D'Angelo didn't know who Beck was, but I don't get the sense that he was as amped to talk to Beck as Beck was to talk to D'Angelo. A striking thing happens throughout that interview, which is when they start to get down to first principles—Why do you do what you do, what are your influences?—all of a sudden they are starting to talk in the same language. Over the course of the hour, you start to see two people who realize they actually had things to talk about.

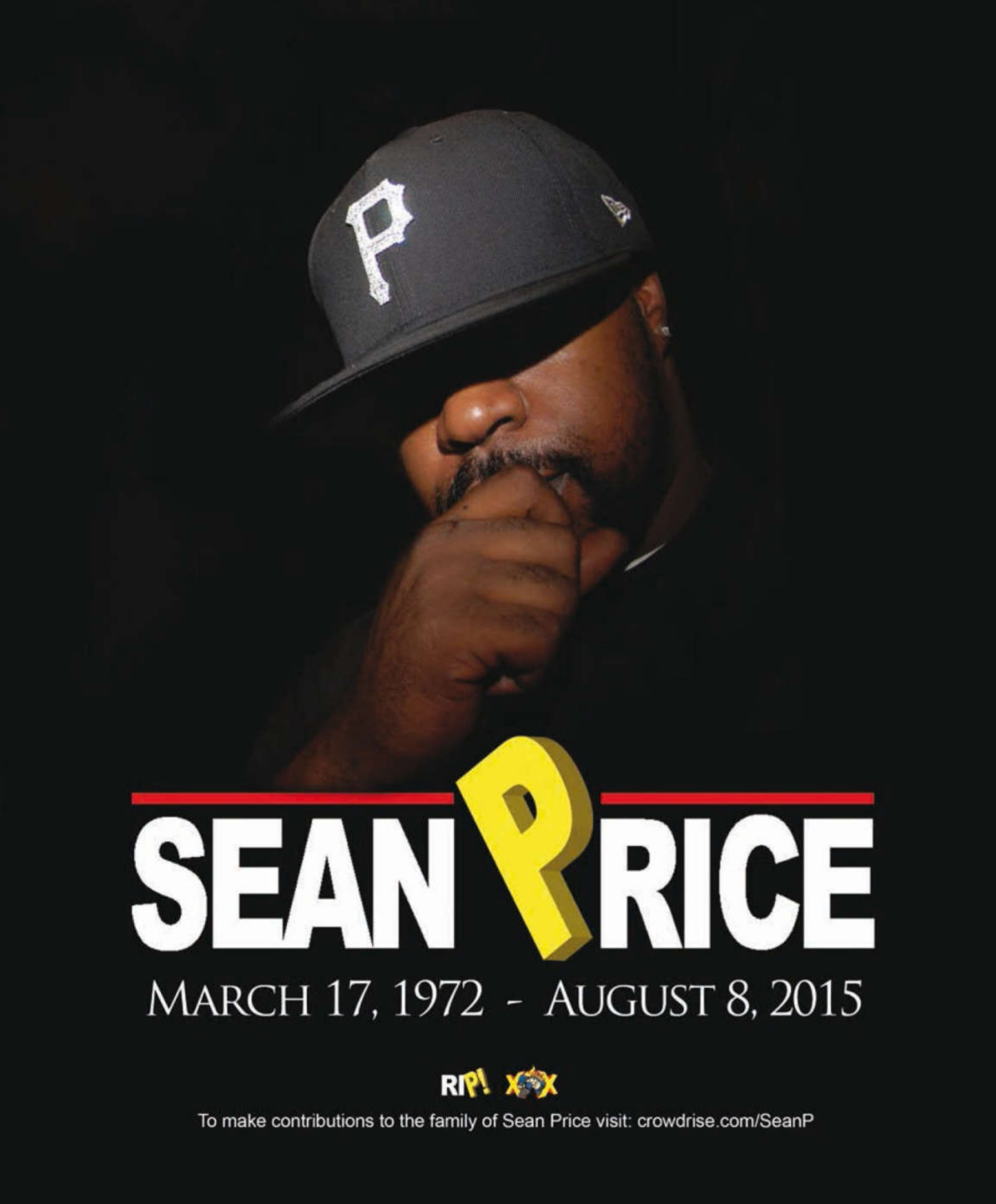




Jon Cohen: We started doing two covers because it gave us prime real estate to make a very big statement on the way that genres were starting to influence each other.

Andy Cohn (president and publisher): A lot of music magazines were focused on growing their circulation, charging more for advertising, which meant they were very limited in the artists they could put on the cover and the type of artists that they would cover in the magazine.

PHOTOGRAPHY JONATHAN MANNION (TOP).

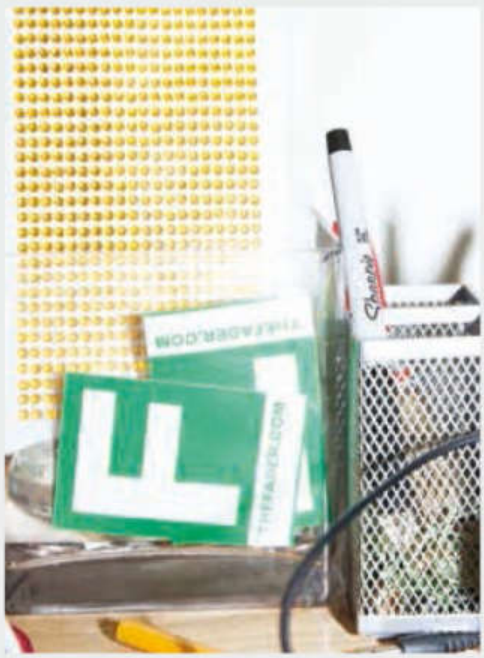

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Rob Stone: We were never about revenue from ads. This was going to be about us documenting culture. That's why we put an artist on the back cover. We didn't care about selling the back page.

Knox Robinson (former editor-in-chief): It's kind of too obvious, too easy, to think of FADER's two covers as the twin poles of hip-hop culture and indie rock. You could have a black cover and a white cover, but what would Jimi Hendrix say about that? At the time, Outkast was really rocked-the-fuck-out, and The Strokes were kind of the flyest dudes in the city, more than rappers. Brothers were wearing leathers and digging indie, and there were electric guitar solos on hip-hop records. It was an incredible watershed moment for the culture.

I wanted a magazine for black kids to feel okay about being into rock and white kids to feel okay about being into hip-hop. I don't think every brother in hip-hop had to be out there FUBU'd down and baggy to the fullest. There's a lot of ways to celebrate black male style, and we were trying to portray that whole range, that whole mix that's the rich heritage and legacy of black American culture. I didn't even really want to make it that big of a deal; I wanted to demystify it, actually.

Jon Caramanica: The idea that all those people should live in the same playlist, CD collection, iPod, was novel in the early 2000s. It shouldn't have been, but it was. You have to understand in the '90s people were fighting culture wars. This is sort of the beginning of the shift away from that. The idea that all of those people could live in the same house, and, quietly, behind closed doors, actually had a lot to say to each other. That was radical. And The FADER was at the center of that particular conversation before any other music magazine showed up.





Jon Cohen and Rob Stone with Outkast's André 3000 in 2004.

Eric Ducker: Eddie and Knox were really into the idea of new journalism, which had been a movement in the '60s and '70s made famous by people like Tom Wolfe and Joan Didion and Hunter S. Thompson. Some people hated that we did that; some people thought it was self-obsessed, and distracting from the subjects. But it was this idea that we've got to do something different. Let's not be boring. Let's try to have fun.

Eddie Brannan: The old FADER office was central with corridors all the way round it. That's why it was, and still is, called the fishbowl. That was our office, and it was messy. There was stuff all over the place. There was usually music playing at maximum volume. We would be coming in the morning hungover, sometimes straight to work from wherever the hell we'd been. Knox and I got in a ridiculous car accident one night. He had to take some time off. I was in the office the next morning with whiplash in my neck. Lee Harrison was freaked out because we'd both nearly killed ourselves.

Anoma Whittaker (former fashion editor): I was living with Eddie Brannan. Knox was always falling asleep on my sofa and chair. Simonez [Wolf, a former fashion editor] was always around or scattered or late or lost a garment bag. It was a nonstop group of people. It never felt like we weren't talking about all of it—if it wasn't in the office, it was downstairs in the bar, or it was in our apartment on Union Street in Gowanus. On Fridays, you'd go to El Sombrero, and you'd get frozen margaritas in the milkshake cups and then do editorial meetings and end up at the basketball court on Delancey, twisted on really cheap tequila, still talking.

Eric Ducker: Jeff Staple was doing the design. His photo editor at the time was Angelo, who is now at Supreme. We'd scan the photos, bag 'em up, and send the actual photos to the printer in Canada with the discs, and then someone would have to drive up to the printing plant and check the color proofs. I think Lee and Anthony would do that. To some rural place in Canada.

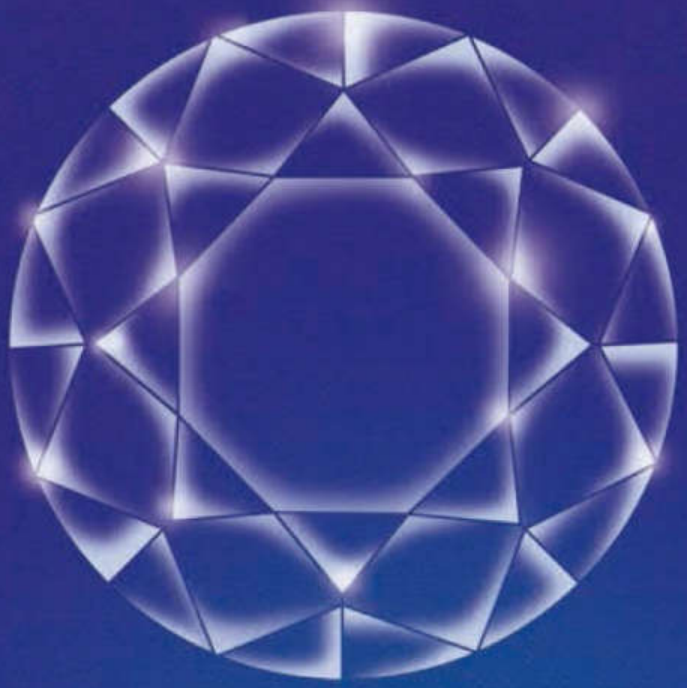
Will Welch (former deputy editor): A classic, definitive FADER cover to me was Cam'ron and M.I.A. Cam'ron had had this

"The idea that all those people should live in the same playlist, CD collection, iPod, was novel in the early 2000s. It shouldn't have been, but it was."

Jon Caramanica

PHOTOGRAPHY EMILY KEEGIN FOR THE FADER (LEFT).

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Photo proof from M.I.A.'s first FADER shoot.

sort of rickety career, but had established this crazy momentum based around this whole mixtape culture that was happening in Harlem. M.I.A. was this girl from London who Diplo had connected with, and who Knox Robinson had found out about, sort of through Diplo. She was a complete unknown entity. You could have called them shots in the dark.

Knox Robinson: The first time I heard Kanye West, he was in Rob Stone's office freestyling with the backpack on. The kid wanted to be recognized as an artist and seen as a lyricist. The passion that he was putting on right there for the hard sale—it was crazy to watch.

Will Welch: He was just coming from a totally different perspective. At the time, 50 Cent was dominating hip-hop. It was like 50 Cent and G-Unit. But Kanye was talking about going to college.

When he came up to the office to do the interview, Knox and I decided we would interview him together. I suggested some restaurant in the area, and Kanye was like, "No, I just saw a Boston Market. Let's go to the Boston Market." There was a Boston Market down the street, so we walked over there and sat down and got food and talked for a long time. Kanye had a Roc chain on, and there was some kid that was like, "Kanye!" and threw up the Roc symbol. Kanye was so stoked that somebody had recognized him, because at the time you had to be a real rap nerd to recognize the guy who did the sped-up soul samples on *The Blueprint*. He was like, "Oh yeah, I got recognized on the street. Sweet." He didn't say that, but you could tell he was stoked.

In true Kanye fashion, his publicist, Gabe Tesoriero, called me two weeks after the interview and was like, "Kanye wants to talk to you. He feels like you're not done with the interview." I was like, "Between me and you, the magazine has shipped. It's at the printer." He was like, "Man, it doesn't matter, you got to have another conversation with the guy." Nothing is ever done.

By the mid-2000s, FADER was finding its footing and an identity defined by documentary photography.

Phil Bicker (former creative director): I came from *The Face*, where I stuck Kate Moss on the cover—a 15-year-old girl who represented what I felt was the demographic of the magazine. She wasn't a supermodel—not one of the six-foot supermodels. So you know that kind of thought process was applied to FADER, in terms of having content that fits the demographic of the magazine.

Will Welch: Phil was like, "We're not doing any more fucking posing rappers or any sad indie rockers against a wall. It's just not going to happen anymore." At the time, that was just what a photo shoot was in the music industry. We were calling people and insisting on coming to their houses. That was just really dicey on so many levels, but Phil, he just wouldn't relent on that. We'd be like, "Man, I don't know. This guy's saying he doesn't really have a house. He moves between places. He's in his friend's car or on somebody's couch." He'd be like, "Perfect, we want to go to his friend's couch."

Phil Bicker: The point and purpose was photography first. FADER photos were documentary in spirit, but not documentary in fact. I think that the idea of text and image telling you the same story is something which the mainstream has dedicated itself to for so long, you know? Photos illustrate text. At FADER, photos didn't illustrate text. Photos ran to tell you something that the text maybe couldn't. If there was a reason to explain what was going on somehow in the context of what happened, that was fine. But there was no reason for the two things to be repetitive. They could weave in and out of each other.

Alex Wagner (former editor-in-chief): When I came on, it was like absolute, un-


Rob Stone, Kanye West, and Jon Cohen at The FADER FORT in 2009.

PHOTOGRAPHY LIZ JOHNSON-ARTUR (TOP). DOROTHY HONG FOR THE FADER (BOTTOM).

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mitigated, disastrous chaos. We would be there until like 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning during close. Someone would break out, like, bourbon. The computer server—which was nicknamed Buttercup—would shut down, and we would lose features. And we would play that song, *Why do you build me up/ Buttercup, baby, just to let me down?* It was totally, totally awful and spectacular in its chaos.

Will Welch: There was, like, four or five of us sitting in a really sweaty room talking about music we loved, talking about ideas, talking about photography and design and writing. It was just not a clock in and clock out job. You were there all the time. There was a shit load of fighting about stuff. A lot of screaming and sweating and cussing.

Alex Wagner: First we get our egg and cheese sandwiches, then at like 4 o'clock we'd have lunch, and then at like 7 o'clock we start thinking about maybe leaving the office and then we all go to a show. I remember my boyfriend at the time was just like, "We no longer exist in the world because you are at the office all the time." It was like a treehouse, this hideaway. And then a magazine happened to pop out of it every few weeks.

"People forget that there is nothing they have done that wasn't the result of a lot of other people's hard work. I never thought of the magazine as mine. I thought of it as ours."
Alex Wagner

Eric Ducker: I think Alex Wagner made things a lot more professional. Even the fights felt grown up.

Alex Wagner: I am of the mind that fighting is a good thing. I just think there's something really reassuring and honest about a place where you could just scream at people. The number of times Will would just leave my office and slam the door and it would shake the hallway. Phil punched a hole in the wall once. He was a pain in the ass in the beginning. I remember he came in and laid out all of these cover shots on the floor and he said, "I am up here, and you're down here." At first, we were like, "You're a dick." And then it became, "Phil's incredible, and has so much integrity, and his taste is impeccable."



The FADER fishbowl in 2007.

Eric Ducker: Making sure Phil had a production coordinator, a photo editor—Alex fought to get the staff to a somewhat reasonable size. There's more people to just do the work. The magazine was growing in size—you just had to have more people.

Dorothy Hong (former photo coordinator): A FADER shoot would always be really quick. I learned how to shoot quickly. Every other magazine, there would be various setups, clothing changes, but at FADER, there was no wardrobe, no hair and makeup. It was very much, go to their apartment, their studio, wherever they work and shoot them there, with just natural light.

Phil Bicker: I would do so much research. I'd say, "Okay, right, we're doing Kanye. What's the research basis for Kanye?" Not two or three pictures—hundreds of pictures. I would send those photos to the photographer. It was like, "Here's a picture of Stevie Wonder, because I kind of think it relates to something about Kanye."

Jason Nocito (photographer): You would just show up and shoot people. I went down to hang out with Cat Power at her house and slept on her floor. We ended up staying up all night drinking—I had never drunk whiskey that way my entire life—and the bottle was shrinking, and I was basically blacking out. I was shooting photos for hours with no film in the camera. Didn't notice. Then, we woke up the next day and we took these beautiful photos completely hungover—that was the way things would roll.

Alongside music, style was always an integral part of The FADER, with a focus on emerging designers and fashion editorials shot all over the world.

Phil Bicker: The idea with FADER fashion is that it should be much more related to the photography, and much less related to the idea of being fashion for fashion's sake. Not so *Vogue*. The idea was that people should look like they're wearing their clothes. Andrew Dosunmu, a photographer who I'd worked with a long way back,


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PHOTOGRAPHY JASON NOCITO (M.I.A. AND CAT POWER). JONATHAN MANNION (KANYE WEST).


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introduced me to this young guy he was working with called Mobolaji. And blessings to me and thanks to Andrew, I inherited Mobolaji at the outset, and that was a great relationship. I thought FADER budgets weren't too great, but Mobolaji has had a good run on it, traveling the world.

Mobolaji Dawodu (style editor-at-large): I started when I was 23. I got a call, "Do you have a passport?" I said yes, but then I couldn't find my passport, so I got a new one in two days, and Phil Bicker sent me off to Jamaica for the first fashion story that I ever did, issue 24, and I ended up staying three weeks. Since then, I've been to India, I've been to South Africa, I've been to Mozambique, I've been to Thailand, I've been to every continent except Australia and Antarctica.

Dorothy Hong: Mobolaji is unlike any other stylist that I work with. Other stylists are a little more organized, maybe. With him, everything will be wrinkled or something. He won't bring a steamer with him. He won't bring all the right sizes, and then we'll just mix and match.

Erin Hansen (former fashion assistant): The style editor Chioma Nnadi, Mobolaji, and I were forever brainstorming resourceful ways to make something beautiful from nothing.

Mobolaji Dawodu: We're loaned clothes out from showrooms, and I take them packed in two big duffle bags—I call them body bags—and we travel. I do street-casting, so it could be someone that I meet on a plane, it could be someone that I bump into on the street. I just basically find people that I feel have a vibe, someone that stands out amongst the crowd, somebody that has something—an individual style, something very specific to themselves. You let people wear their own clothes if they choose to. Like, you don't force a hat because you want to get a hat credit in.

The FADER's reputation grew in the mid-2000s, in part owing to prescient covers and enthusiastic, oddball tastemaking.

Alex Wagner: I think part of the thing that has granted The FADER unprecedented access to certain people is the fact that very early on there was a decision made not to write nasty record reviews. And that distinguished it from like every music magazine ever. It was like, "Oh we are not going to have fun shitting all over your record that you worked really hard on. We're just gonna actually put music in the magazine that we like."

Sam Hockley-Smith (former senior editor): I remember coming in as an intern, and I got assigned to write a small review of some compilation. I was like, "I wanna be the cool critic guy." It wasn't a negative thing, but I was a little extreme on the negative side. I remember at the time Will Welch was like, "Hey, I get what you're saying, but did you like this at all? Because if not, we just shouldn't run it. Let's run something that you're enthusiastic about." It was such a nice culture to be a part of.

Peter Macia (former editor-in-chief): What's always cool about FADER being staffed by young inexperienced writers is that it fits the subject matter. We've never written about stuff like the *New York Times* does. We don't want it to be the record of something. It's, "I'm a young person, I'm super excited, and I'm going to write exactly how I basically talk."

Alex Wagner: When we were hiring people, we very consciously didn't want to hire people that seemed like they would work at a music magazine—or necessarily a magazine. I mean, that's why we would hire DJs.

Nick Barat (former associate editor): At the time, there were still lots of magazines, so you could be the sort of person who has a college degree, but you're doing little blurbs about Dave Matthews



Mobolaji Dawodu.

PHOTOGRAPHY ANDREW DOSUNMU FOR THE FADER (TOP).

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"There were no YouTubes, there were no embeds. We would get mixtapes from the African dude that had a stall on 14th Street and bring them back and play them really loud and then write about it."

Nick Barat

Band in *Blender*. We were the antithesis of that. If you have wack sneakers, I don't care about your opinion on music. We were out at clubs. It wasn't a time where everything was discoverable on the internet. Even stuff we take for granted—there were no YouTubes, no embeds. We would get mixtapes from the African dude that had a stall on 14th Street and bring them back and play them really loud and then write about it. If you wanted to write about something, you had to dig around and you had to find the weird cell phone number of the weird friend who is going to put you in touch with David Banner because David Banner's label publicist is not fucking with him at the moment.

Sometimes there were just brick covers—amazing stories, awesome pieces of reportage and art and phenomenal photos, but in terms of what's supposed to go on a magazine cover, like, total bricks. I remember the Maceo cover in Atlanta. In retrospect you look back and the same time that Maceo's records were coming out, there were other records by his labelmate, this guy named Gucci Mane. It could've just as easily been Gucci Mane on the cover instead, but that's the roll of the dice. They sent Diplo down to interview Maceo—Diplo is actually, on the low, a really interesting writer and is able to just kind of finagle his way into situations like nobody else—and they sent Jonathan Mannion down to take photos, and it's this amazing snapshot of strip-club rap and bando rap before there was a name for it. But Maceo didn't do anything at all with his career. It was a fail, but it was a dope fail.



The Strokes at The FADER 9 issue release party.

As the magazine developed, The FADER started showcasing artists and its own brand with increasingly large events.

Jon Cohen: The FORT was really born from a party we had after the 2002 VMAs, where The Strokes played in a very small environment. We called it Lowlife, and it was almost an anti-VMAs party. How do we create an event on that same night to appeal to everyone that wanted to be a part of what was going on in downtown New York but couldn't really care less about what Britney Spears was going to do? The block was shut down, and we had literally 5 to 6,000 people trying to get into this 2,500-capacity space, and it went on until 6 in the morning. That was the moment when FADER went from the pages to becoming something tangible.


Diplo at The FADER's Sundance party in 2004.

Kai Regan (photographer): Two thousand people in a party drinking with three bathrooms—I saw this dude Gavin McInnes drinking a beer while at the bar getting another drink, pissing in a trash can. And then he looked at me and winked.

Jon Cohen: André and Big Boi were there, Jack and Meg from the White Stripes, Brittany Murphy randomly was there, all of Van Halen was there. It was just this random mix of worlds colliding and it was a chance for everyone to truly realize that FADER has defined its own culture. The Strokes—this is the height of The Strokes' success—were out of their mind drunk. But they played an incredible show.

Rob Stone: The next morning I got a phone call from Puff. I had invited him to the party, and he was just like "Yo, next time you got a party, I need a back door. I need a side entrance. You can't expect me to come in the front." He's like, "The block was closed down!" He was annoyed with me that he didn't get into a party after I probably haven't gotten into 10 Bad Boy parties.

Andy Cohn: Sticking to our original mission statement and applying it to events—it meant that people saw the logo, and it meant something to them. We were able to translate that outside of print, to let people see it in the real world.

Robert English (EVP, music and talent): We decided to test out Austin during SXSW in 2003. I think we called it the Warehouse. None of us had experience booking talent. We didn't have a stage, unless you count a large area rug on a cold, unfinished concrete floor. I wasn't sure if bands would

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Lil B, Diddy, Odd Future, Damon Albarn, and Snoop Dogg at The FADER FORT in Austin.

PHOTOGRAPHY CHRISTELLE DE CASTRO (ODD FUTURE), JOHN FRANCIS PETERS (DIDDY), RYAN MUIR (DAMEN ALBARN).

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want to play if they weren't being paid, but there was immediate interest.

Anoma Whittaker: Damian [Bulluck, former director of marketing] made sure the people who came to a FADER event thought it was their event. During CMJ, FADER had washing machines, because all of the rockers were grimey. We'd let them clean their clothes and drink alcohol. It seemed silly, but if you're a musician that really meant something.

Kaela LaRosa (former senior marketing and events director): With SXSW in Austin, I was very lucky to be there for a transition through these different size spaces, going from a couple-hundred-person capacity to 500- or 600-person capacity to the big FORT space.

Robyn Baskin (VP, marketing and events): I often think of FORT as the living, breathing embodiment of our magazine. It's everything FADER represents come to life. The audience, the music, the style.

Rob Stone: The FORT is just as important to us as the magazine.

Matthew Schnipper (former editor-in-chief): I think one of the things that The FORT wanted to say was, "Anything can belong anywhere." That was exciting, that anything could be a part of anything else. If you build it, they will come. Throw this shit together and say this is what makes FADER. We got Lil B and Puffy to perform together, which makes no sense but also makes perfect sense.

The FADER began before music blogs really existed, but by around 2006, it was pretty clear that the internet would change both publishing and music.

Nick Barat: I feel like in the early days of the website, publicists and label people didn't know what was at their disposal. They didn't know the power and the reach, and that was when they were still shutting down, like, Zshares and stuff. It was really this backwards approach, so that led our web content to be a little bit more improvisational.



Nine weeks of Schnipper's Slept On, a long-running online column.

Anthony Holland (chief operating officer): We had started posting magazine content online, but when we hired Nick in 2005 is when we launched the real website and blog. Seeing Nick and knowing that the future was rapid blogging, and that was a new form of emerging journalism that was different than print—that's key. We took traditional high quality journalism and brought it to the web, and we had that viewpoint even when we were doing simple blogging stuff.

Julianne Escobedo Shepherd (former executive editor): We didn't care if a post was gonna get a million hits. You could just write blog posts. It was stream of consciousness. I was interested in Lauren Flax's music, and one day she was like, "Hey, I just did this song with this girl Sia," who, at the time, had just been on a Zero 7 album. So we wrote about it. We premiered Odd Future tracks because Tyler, the Creator would send me these weird emails with his capital writing. I was just like, "Who is this weird 18-year-old? But these songs are fire, so let's put 'em up." It was about reading weird emails from 18-year-olds. And then they become famous. We were mostly focused on the magazine, so the blogging was free-range. It was so much fun.

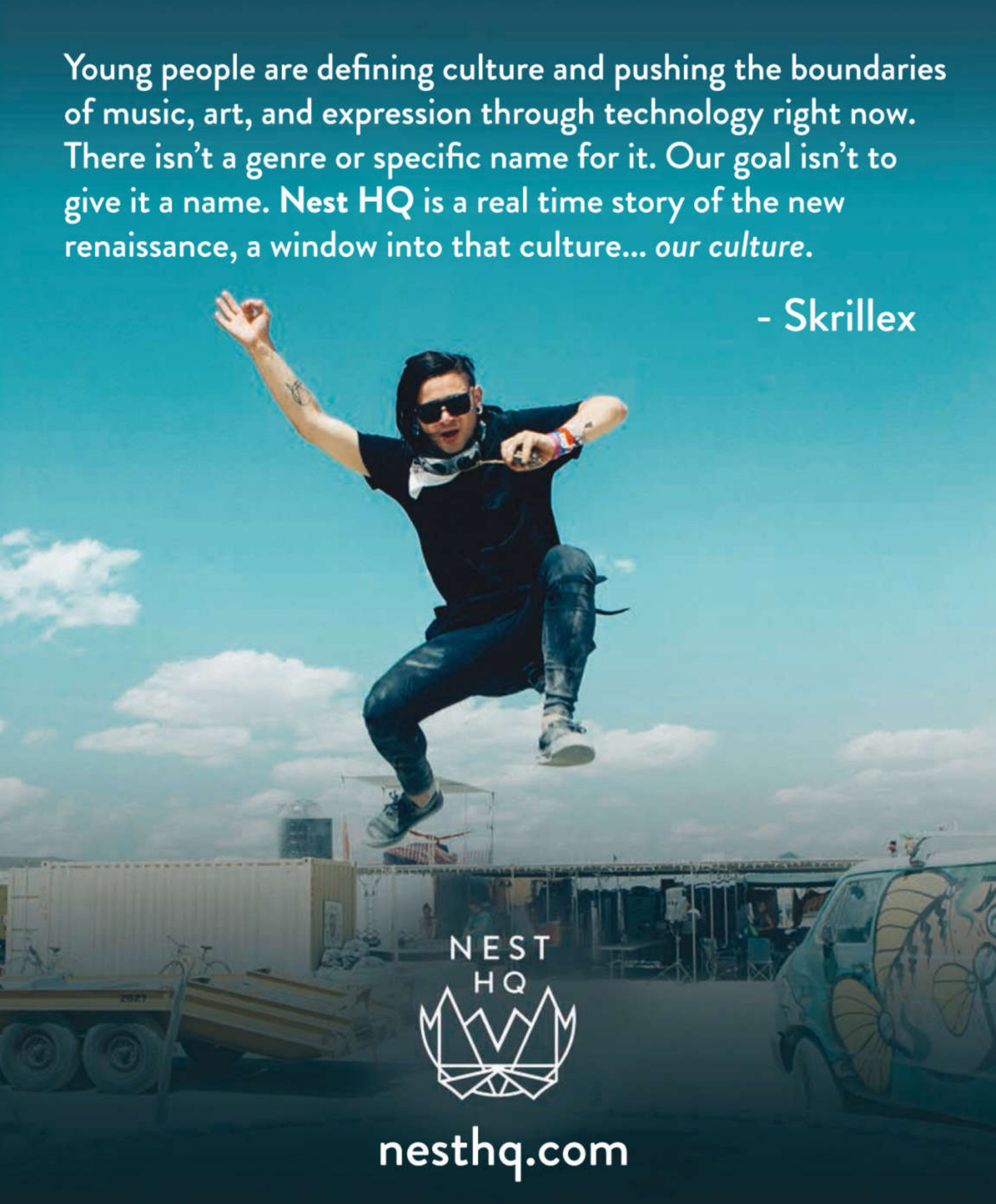
Sam Hockley-Smith: There was a period where I was running rampant making these awful JPEGs based on what I imagined a song would sound like. I'd be like, "This Rick Ross song sounds like dolphins are jumping over his head." And I'm not good at Photoshop, so I'd sort of cut out half of his body and find a stock image of dolphins.

Alex Wagner: I always thought we were creating FADER for someone out there who is like us, who may have been a unicorn! I mean there was no concrete evidence we had that this person existed but we really wanted them to, and we did not want to disappoint this person.

Naomi Zeichner (editor-in-chief): As a reader, I was into the website before I was into the magazine. I was at college reading art history papers, super frustrated with how badly academics were writing about art. So I'd read a column like Schnipper's Slept On or Ghetto Palms and feel relieved that the writing was smart and also similar to how I talked. I liked that it was personal. Sam telling you what

Young people are defining culture and pushing the boundaries of music, art, and expression through technology right now. There isn't a genre or specific name for it. Our goal isn't to give it a name. **Nest HQ** is a real time story of the new renaissance, a window into that culture... *our culture*.

- Skrillex



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he got for lunch or Julianne telling you what party she went to—I was living in Portland, Oregon. It was a really boring fucking place. Twitter existed, but it was still new—the experience kids have now, building aspirational Twitter timelines—that didn't really exist. In 2008, FADER was that: a smart conversation between people you trusted.

Matthew Schnipper: When Alex Wagner hired me, she said, "You just like all the weirdo stuff. Just bring that in." I'd just written a story about free jazz for FADER. They're like, "Yeah, that's cool. Just do that."

Andy Cohn: When 2008 came, 2009 came, the recession hit. It was a huge turning point for the magazine where we did see a lot of competitors going out of business, or going online only and then ultimately going away. I think what we were forced to do was be scrappy, and be really aggressive with building FADER as a brand—not just as a print magazine—but as a brand.

Anthony Holland: During that time, a lot of other magazines cut the page size, cut the quality, scrambled to do all this short term stuff that ended up destroying their brands. But we never compromised.

Matthew Schnipper: I was 28 when I became the editor. I was fucking terrified. I didn't have a journalism background. We didn't have a fact-checking department. We didn't have a research department. No one told us how to do this. We didn't have copy editors.

I just learned to trust people who care deeply. Someone like Andrew Nosnitsky, a guy I met in college. We became friends talking about records, going to buy records from weird dudes that we met on Craigslist. He can be a pain in the butt, but he knows better than everybody. I think that was what we looked for in young talent: people who'd just decided that they knew better than everybody.

Amber Bravo (former deputy editor): If I'm knee-deep in a 2,000 word feature that I have to edit the day before we're supposed to ship the magazine—or worse, I'm writing it—and you ask me what it's like to work at FADER, I'd tell you, it's a fucking nightmare. But if you ask me again, when I'm on assignment, zooming through the streets of Paris in a tiny VW, sitting on the lap of Cat Power, one of my musical idols, I'd tell you it's a fucking dream.



On the roof of The FADER's 23rd street offices in 2002.

Sam Hockley-Smith: For a while, we were not ready to keep up with the internet. When Naomi came on full-time, it started to be a lot about the web. I distinctly remember a shift when talking to publicists. We'd be like, "We can't fit them in the magazine for this issue, but we would love to interview them for the site." And they'd be kind of disappointed. But I remember a shift when that stopped mattering.

Matthew Schnipper: It was like learning to drive while you were in the car by yourself going really fast, which is real terrifying and also very thrilling at the same time. MP3 blogs first, then Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat. All these things enabled us to hear a lot of music we hadn't been able to hear. Things did not have to be printed on a physical piece of media anymore. That meant our access was so much bigger. It was amazing.

Naomi Zeichner: I clearly wanted to get the numbers up—I grew up on the internet, thinking it mattered how far something you shared reached. I wasn't using clickbait strategies because I didn't know what those were. I barely knew how to use a comma. I just knew what resonated. I wanted to get weed recipes on the site. I wanted Alley Boy to talk to me about why he was mad at Jeezy. I did a bunch of Wiz Khalifa stuff.

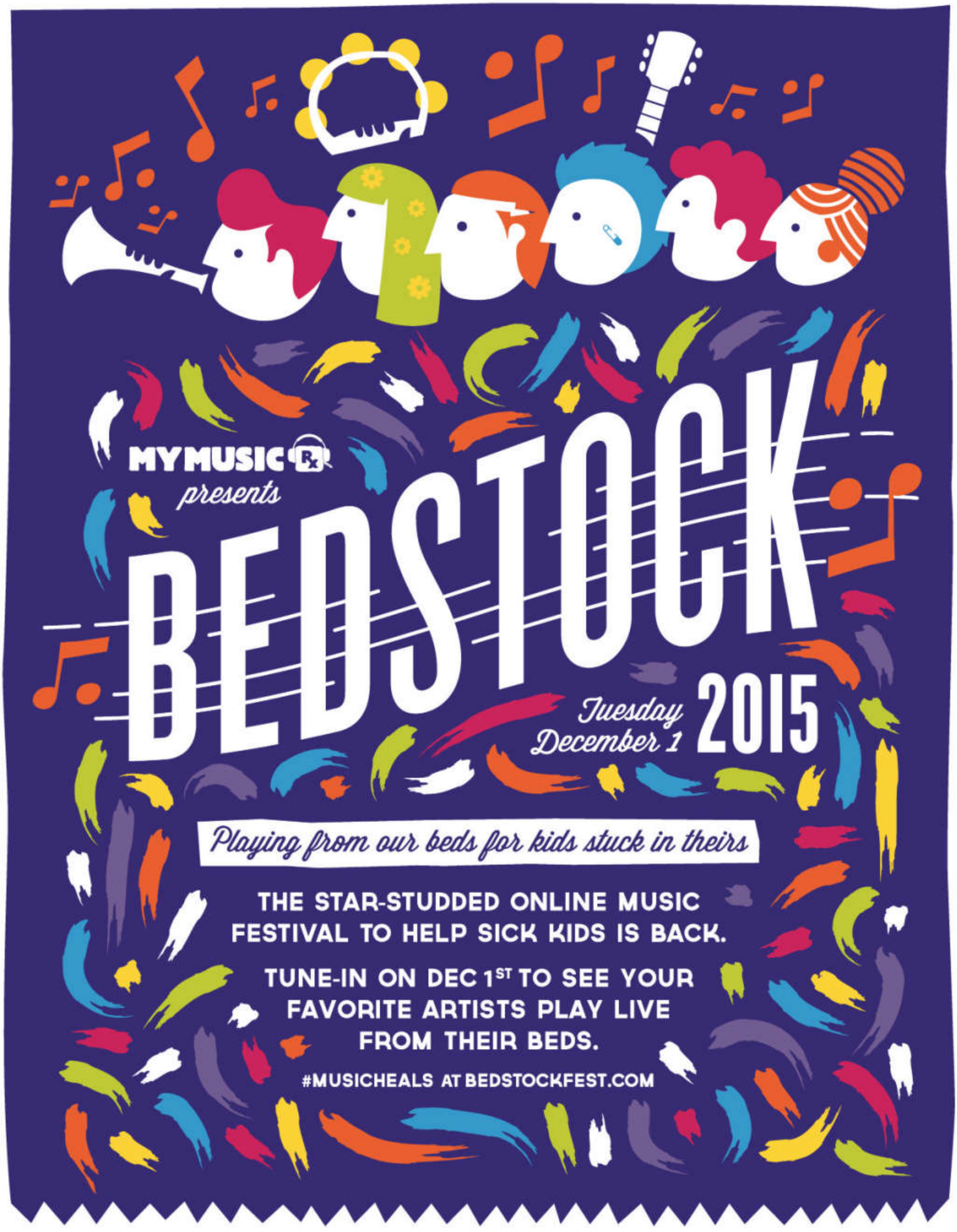
Matthew Schnipper: I think a lot of change has come from social media. Artists being able to talk to people as much as you want in a million different forms—I think that makes what FADER does a little bit more special.

Jason Nocito: Around 2010 is when it started to change. Around when Odd Future popped up on the radar. They had

"It was like learning to drive while you were in the car by yourself going really fast, which is real terrifying and also very thrilling at the same time."

Matthew Schnipper

PHOTOGRAPHY KAI REGAN FOR THE FADER.


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created so much content, and really good content. Their books are amazing. Everything they've done is kind of amazing. In a lot of ways, they didn't need me, they didn't need my photos. When I shot them, they were just so self-aware.

Jon Caramanica: It's the magazine that outlasted a bunch of the ones that planted flags in culture. Because if you planted a flag in indie rock culture in the '90s, it's crickets for you in 2015.

Emilie Friedlander (deputy features editor): At times, it's been really hard to wear all the hats we have to wear here. You always have to be moving your brain at different speeds. Editing a magazine that comes out every two months and writing a blog post that's going to go viral in 15 minutes are very different things. But when you do that all day, and it's really hard, nothing is better than leaving work with a bunch of your friends and going to see Skepta perform. You might've just spent all day editing and writing and thinking about Skepta, but to see him in the sweatiest tiny concert venue ever with everyone else from FADER, that's how it all makes sense.

Nick Barat: It's almost like I'm jealous of how together everything is now. "Damn you all have staff, the website is really tight, you understand how to maximize views on shit." I think that that's really special. But I love that the attitude remains the same. Stuff like the Kacey Musgraves cover, that's an ill curveball, that's the kind of attitude that we were bringing to covers. I think that the sort of alumni network of FADER people who have gone on to do interesting stuff will always sort of maintain that attitude. It's a little bit underdog. I wouldn't go so far as to say it's chip-on-shoulder, but it's definitely this attitude of we're going to prove something. And do it for the right reasons.



Naomi Zeichner: On the 2015 music internet, Spotify can tell you which songs you'll like and brands make video content with the tiniest DJs from the most remote places. It's almost impossible to be early or have strange taste. Everybody wants to be weird. So the best way we can distinguish ourselves now, I think, is just to tell stories with a little more rigor, or a little more expertise. We have to make sure our writers are better than everybody else's, that our editing is on point, that the fact check is thorough. We have to train each other to respond fast and also report with patience and respect. It's not easy at all—some days it feels basically impossible. When I started reading FADER, I felt like I'd found a world that made sense and understood me. Now, I just want to make shit that reaches people who haven't seen FADER before, and get them excited.

Alex Wagner: We never felt constricted, and that's really powerful. To be going from an idea about underground rock in Beijing, and then to be in Beijing, writing that story at, like, 3:00 a.m.—I remember thinking, like, How the fuck did I get here? Once you work at FADER, it is hard to work at another magazine.

Matthew Schnipper: No one told us how to do this. All my lessons were learned within the square of the FADER office. There wasn't time or money to go and spend to get that experience, so we gave it to ourselves. It isn't perfect. But it worked.

Pete Macia: I miss a ton of it. I miss that stupid office more than anything. Just jokes all day long. You could go in there and feel better about life. That's what I miss most. I miss wanting to go out and do that stuff with those particular people—everyone was just so excited to go out and find new things and talk about new things.

Alex Wagner: It just comes down to people that are curious about the world and kind of get it. The editorial staff was so diverse. Someone can be really different from you, but you can understand that they are curious about the world—you can just tell. It wasn't like certain magazines where there's a look and a feel and a style and everybody sort of conforms to that. We were all legitimately into different things. If there's one lesson that I learned at FADER, I think that people who find themselves at executive level positions or get really successful forget that there is nothing they have done that wasn't the result of a lot of other people's hard work. And I never thought of the magazine as mine. I thought of it as ours. Everybody owns this. It was maybe the best job all of us ever had. How am I ever going to have a group of people that I trust and care about as much these people?

PHOTOGRAPHY EMILY KEEGIN FOR THE FADER.

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#uncapped



It's not just our 100th issue. 2015 marks another milestone for The FADER: the fifth year of our epic **vitamin**water #uncapped series.

It all started back in 2011, when we traveled the United States, linking up with 40 rappers in 10 cities to put on amazing shows and produce documentaries about life in their hometowns. The squad included now-household names like French Montana, Danny Brown, and Lil B—but also emerging stars, like THEESatisfaction from Seattle and Fat Trel from Washington D.C.

In 2012, #uncapped was all about the unexpected, pairing two artists from different genres on a single stage for a once-in-a-lifetime show: Frank Ocean with Bon Iver, Passion Pit with 2 Chainz, Best Coast with Kendrick Lamar, Nas with Matt and Kim. It was unlikely and unforgettable.

2013 was a wild one. We stuck to FADER and **vitamin**water's home base in New York and made boring brilliant, throwing concerts in totally unexpected spots. Solange played in a laundromat, Travi$ Scott nearly tore the roof off a bank, and in the grand finale, Big Boi and Future performed in a freaking library.

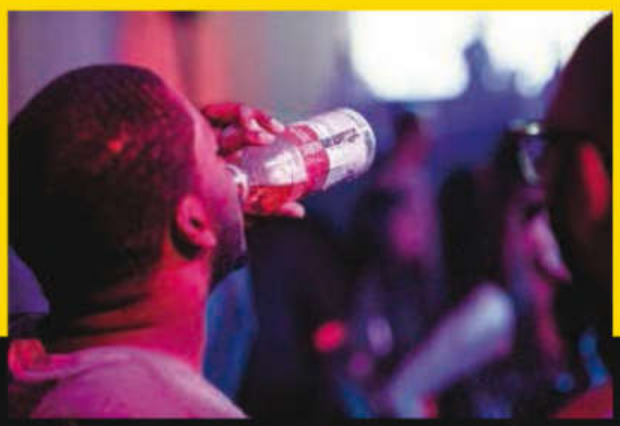
Last year, we kept things tight but got personal, throwing shows in three cities while emphasizing our artists' unique stories of hustle in a spinoff interview series. As always, the lineup was on point, featuring Vic Mensa, Jeremih, Jheke Aiko, Rae Sremmurd, The Internet, and our final night's surprise headliner, Trey Songz.

We'll be popping **vitamin**water bottles again this year—look forward to that, but for now, join us in reliving the good times.

ROGER KISBY, NYC (2013)









ROGER KISBY, NYC (2012), RYAN MUIR, NYC (2014)









RYAN MUIR, PHILLY (2014), ROGER KISBY, NYC (2013), MICHAEL CRAFT, HOUSTON (2012), MATTHEW WILLIAMS, NYC (2012).









RYAN MUIR, PHILLY (2014), ROGER KISBY, NYC (2013), MATTHEW WILLIAMS, SEATTLE (2012), JUSTIN KENT, PORTLAND (2012).

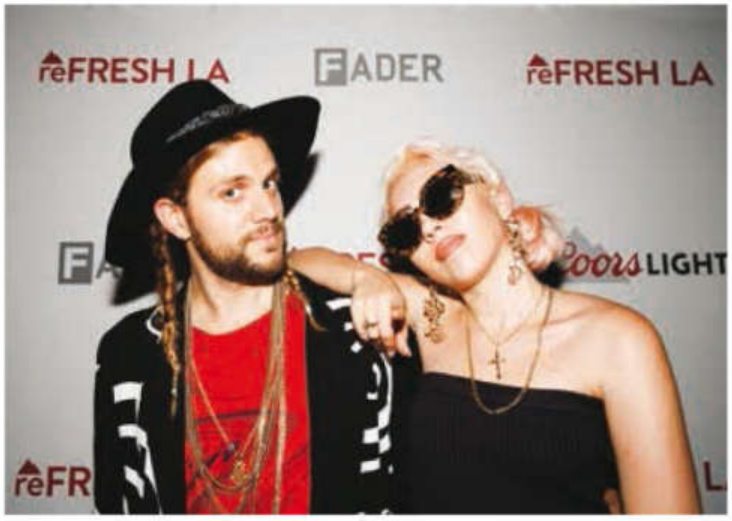
Coors Light reFRESH L.A.



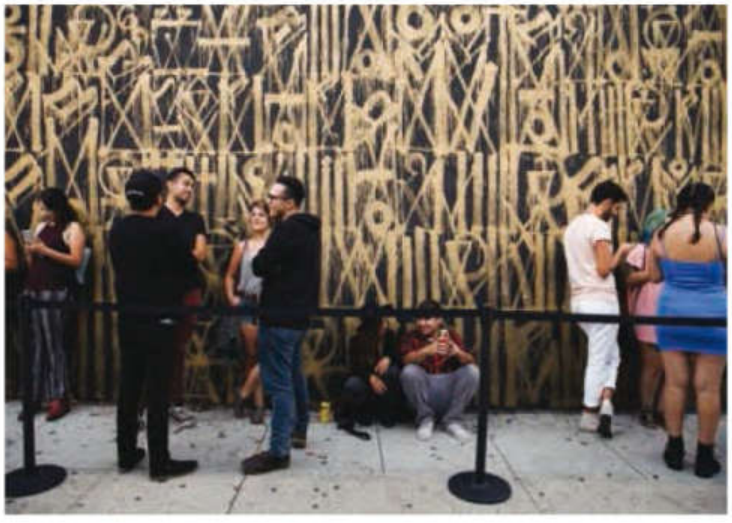
Photography by Emily Berl

Everyone vibed hard in L.A. as WEDIDIT's Groundislava opened with an awesome genre-bending set of dance and hip-hop. Young & Sick, the Dutch bi-coastal musician and artist who designed all of our cool, trippy #refreshLA posters, drew some tight chalkboard art, the bar was stocked with Coors Light, and party-goers copped cotton candy, popcorn, sunglasses, and pics from the BOSCO photo booth. The headlining set from Colombian queen Kali Uchis was a hit, and she even played an unreleased track called "Ya Played Yourself." The dancing continued after, too, as Kali's DJ Brilliant closed out the night.

Kali Uchis and Groundislava





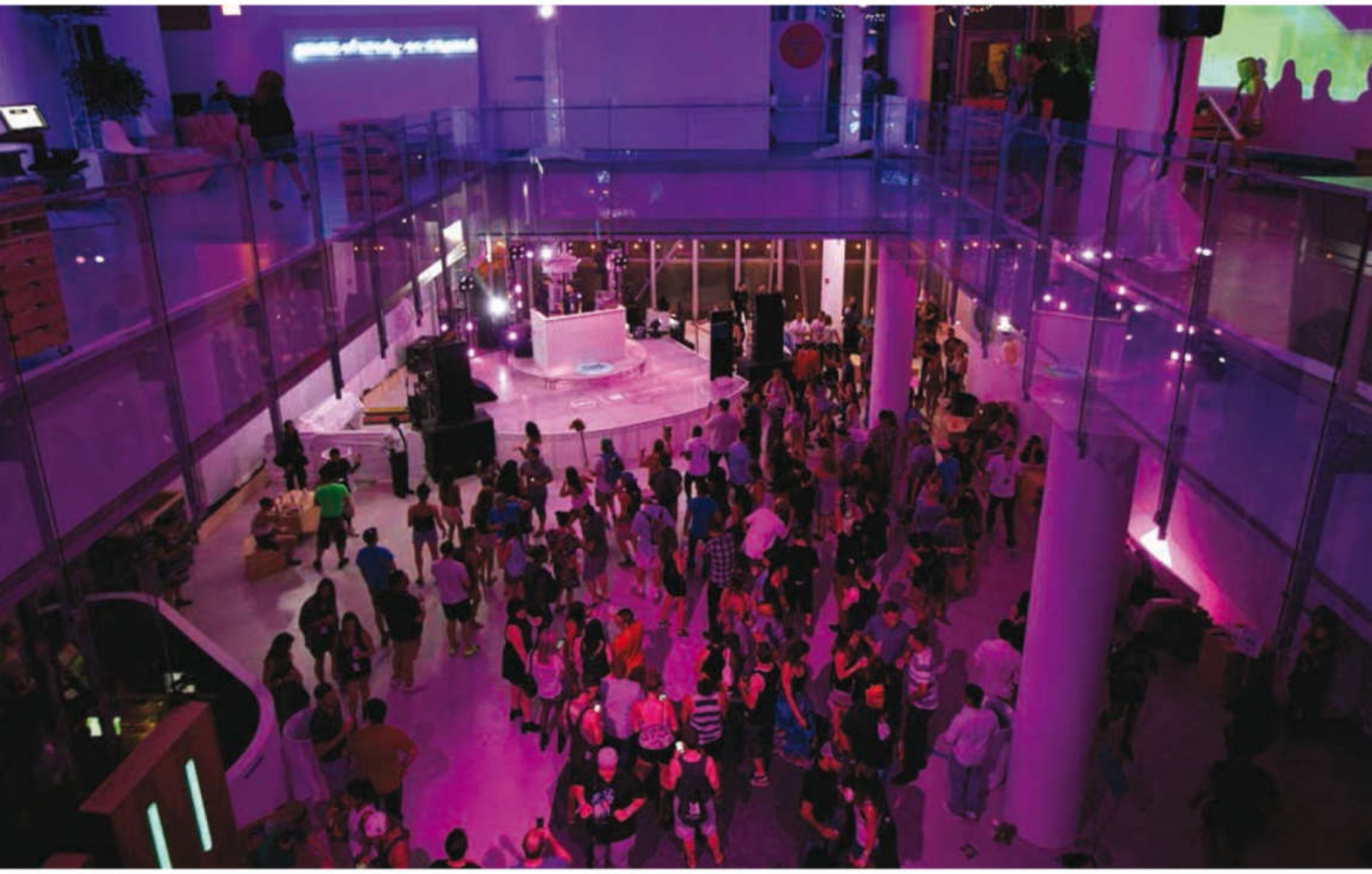








DELL Lounge Lollapalooza



Photography by Matthew Reeves

The Dell Lounge, powered by Windows 10, made sure the energy of Lollapalooza's first day transferred to the after-hours. Bixel Boys' hip-hop heavy opening DJ set kicked the night into gear, as an eclectic crowd sipped a variety of Tito's vodka cocktails. When folks needed a break from the dance floor, little pockets of surprises—from a chill, rooftop deck strung with multicolored lights to super-comfy couches, and neon LED wall art to ping pong tables—were available on every floor. But the party was truly lit once A-Trak took to the elevated stage. Folks jumped on top of wooden benches, and the party, which had started hours earlier, didn't show any signs of letting up.

A-Trak and Bixel Boys













World Surf League: It's On



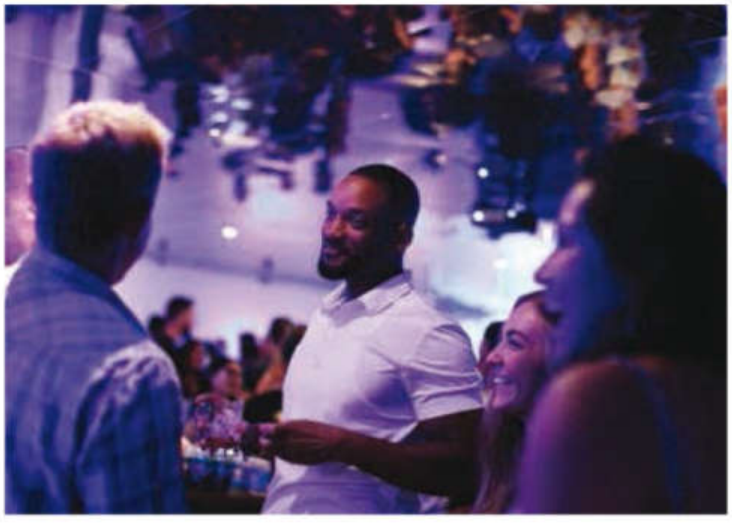
Photography by Emily Berl

To celebrate the Hurley and Swatch Pro at Trestles where the world's best male and female surfers did battle in some of the most high-performance waves on the planet, The FADER teamed up with The World Surf League (WSL) to celebrate surfing, the sea, and seriously good music. Brooklyn-based indie-pop band The Drums co-headlined with Colorado singer-songwriter Nathaniel Rateliff and his band the Night Sweats. Savannah Buffett and Will Smith were among the fans that got to rub elbows with the surfing elite and check out a timeline of surf history (complete with actual vintage surfboards dating back to the 1940s—so cool). Plus, there was a vintage JEEP for people to take souvenir pics in front of, which Rateliff took full advantage of. Solidisco closed out the night with a DJ set, and everyone went home with the beach in their hearts.

Nathaniel Rateliff and The Drums













SOREL's Tivoli Go Launch



Photography by Seher Sikandar

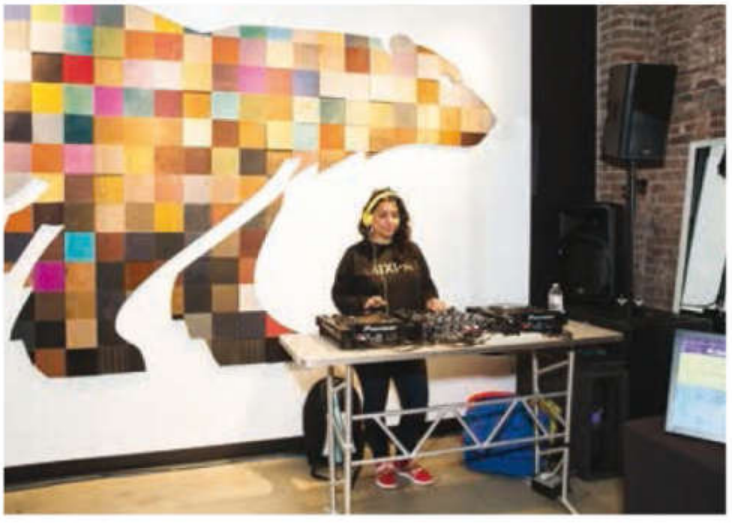
Stylish footwear brand SOREL introduced their latest collection with an exclusive event at their N.Y.C. store. The launch kicked off with a bang as guests dug into the delightfully curated candy bar, colored to match the brand new Tivoli Go Collection. Party-goers enjoyed an opening DJ set by New York DJ/producer Jubilee, while The FADER's style expert Liz Raiss was on-hand to provide tips and the chance to try on SOREL's collections. The night closed with an hour-long DJ set by MTV favorite Jasmine Solano, who kept things bumping with tunes like Nicki Minaj & 2Chainz's "Beez in the Trap."

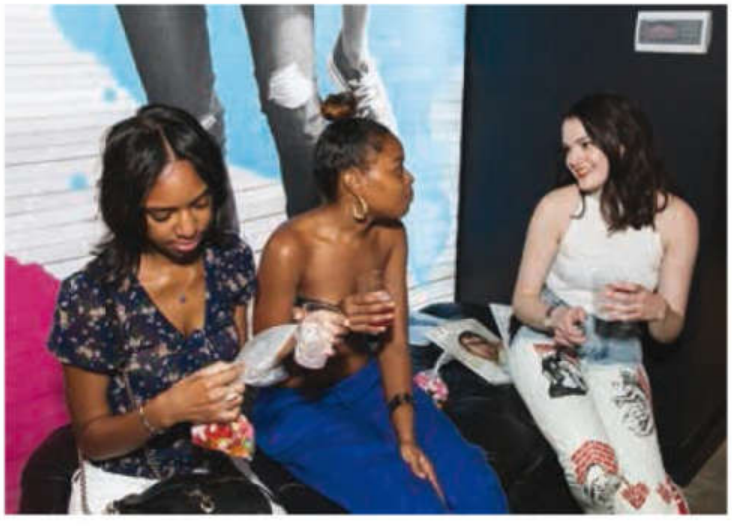
Jasmine Solano and Jubilee













99th Issue Release Party



Photography by Ryan Muir

For the release of The FADER's Fall Fashion issue, we posted up at newly opened Williamsburg venue Black Flamingo. While Harlem producer Austin Millz spun highly danceable hits like "Can't Feel My Face" and "I Know There's Gonna Be (Good Times)," FADER family and friends enjoyed Budweiser and the super chill atmosphere. Empress Of, one of FADER 99's GEN F stars, came by to play the headline slot, joined by surprise guest Chrome Sparks. They closed out the night selecting tunes that had us forgetting it was a Monday. Good times were definitely had.

Empress Of and Chrome Sparks













The Sprite Corner



Photography by Ryan Muir

To close out their month-long residency in New York, The Sprite Corner hosted a finale concert featuring Nas, Isaiah Rashad, and young up-and-comer Jordan Bratton. Bratton kicked the night off with an energetic set backed with a live band, and Isaiah Rashad performed a seven-song set that closed out with "Shot You Down." Show host Frenchy then surprised the crowd by bringing out Nas to do an onstage interview with both him and Isaiah before Nas properly took the stage with DJ Green Lantern to perform for the crowd. "Inspiration comes from everything. It comes from music and great people," Nas offered.

Nas, Isaiah Rashad, and Jordan Bratton













The Sprite Corner



Photography by Ryan Muir

In August, Sprite, The FADER, and a bunch of really creative teenagers met up at The Sprite Corner, a bodega-esque pop-up space in Nolita. Storied photographer Jonathan Mannion was there too, eager to display and discuss some of his most iconic work, which includes FADER shoots like Outkast, Eminem, and that iconic-as-ever Beck and D'angelo cover. Later, the beautiful Chantelle "Winnie" Harlow turned up to chat with Mannion about her inspiring journey from a small-town girl to big-city model and full-blown social media star. While she posed for Mannion's lens, the pair narrated the unconventional shoot with insightful tips, and DJ Toy kept things bouncy with an uptempo soundtrack. After, the teens tested what they learned, some as photographers and some as models, while Mannion and Harlow encouraged them to be the best versions of themselves, on camera and off.

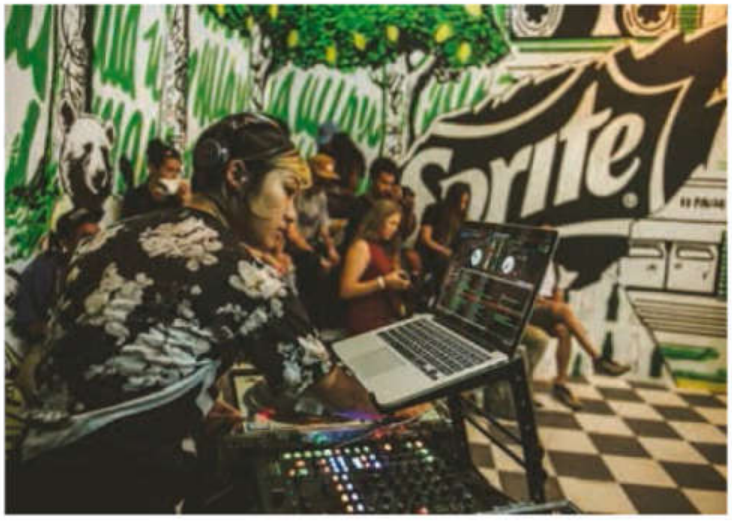
Jonathan Mannion and Chantelle “Winnie” Harlow















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